

魔 と 神 の 魔

ヴァナディース



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王魔と弾丸の姫

ヴァナディース

10





Regina

レギン

Elen

エレン

Elizaveta

エリザヴェータ

Tigre

ティグル

「……ティグル様？」

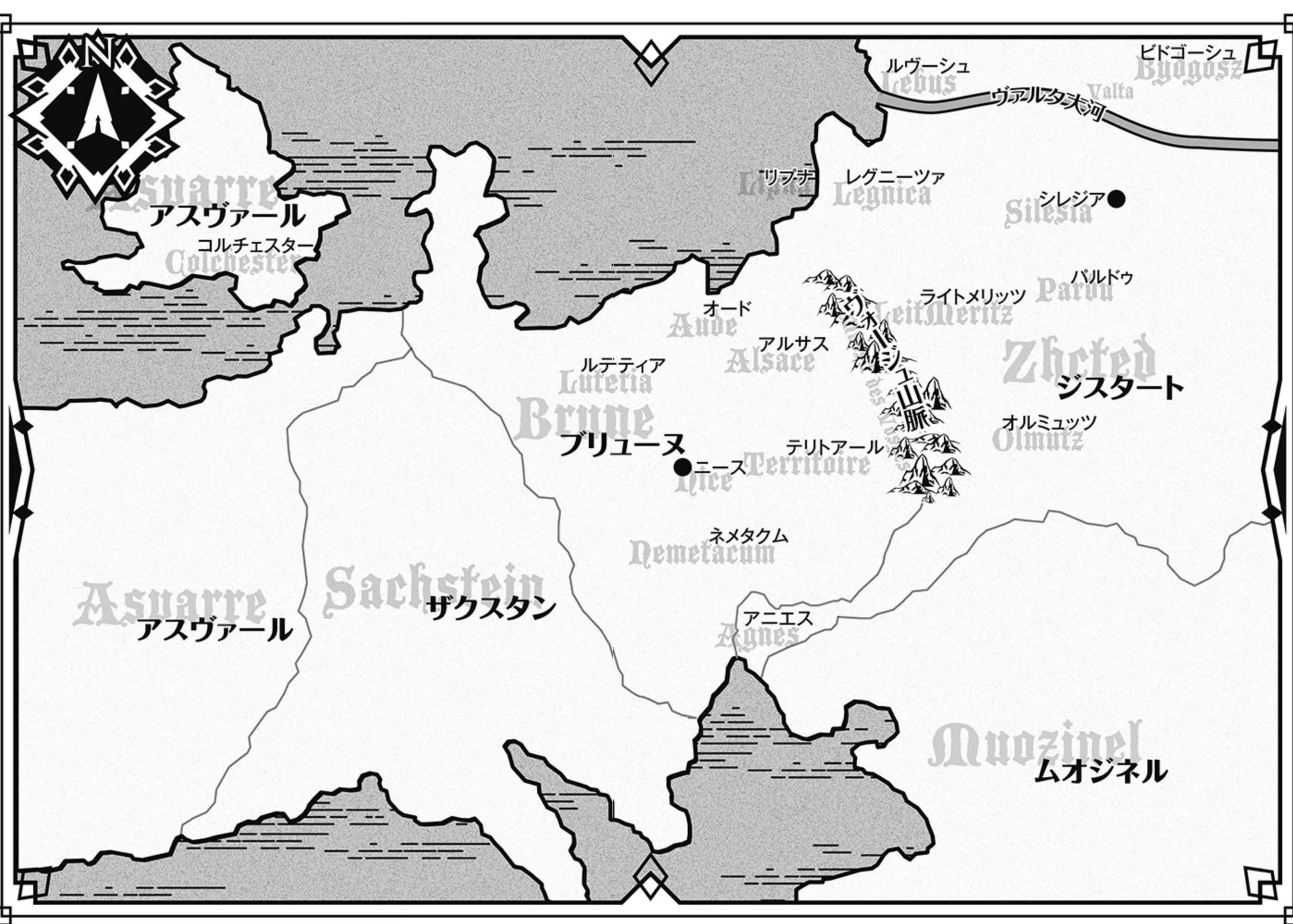
「ティグルヴァルムド卿……？」



くすんだ赤い髪の男は、
荒涼たる大地に毅然とした姿で立っていた。

「ティ……グル？」





登場人物紹介

リュドミラ=ルリエ

七戦姫のひとり。十七歳。愛称はミラ。ジスタート王国の南にあるオルミュツを治めている。竜具は槍の“凍漣”ラヴィアス。エレンとは犬猿の仲。

ソフィーヤ=オベルタス

七戦姫のひとり。二十一歳。愛称はソフィー。ジスタート王国の南東にあるボリーシャを治めている。竜具は錫杖の“光華”ザート。外交に長ける。

アレクサンドラ=アルシャーヴィン

七戦姫のひとりだった。オルシーナ海戦の後、病で命を落とす。愛称はサーシャ。竜具は双剣の“煌炎”バルグレン。

エリザヴェータ=フォミナ

七戦姫のひとり。十八歳。ジスタート王国の北西にあるルヴーシュを治めている。竜具は鞭の“雷渦”ヴァリツァイフ。『異彩虹瞳』の持ち主。記憶を失ったウルスを側えとして雇っている。

オルガ=タム

七戦姫のひとり。十四歳。ジスタート王国の東にあるブレストを治めている。竜具は斧の“羅轟”ムマ。

ヴァレンティナ=グリンカ=エステス

七戦姫のひとり。二十二歳。ジスタート王国の北東にあるオステローデを治めている。竜具は大鎌の“虚影”エザンディス。

レギン

ブリュース王国の王女。十六歳。亡き父に代わり、ブリュース王国を治めている。ティグルを慕っている。

マスハス=ローダント

ブリュース王国の伯爵。ティグルの父ウルスの親友で、彼の死後、ティグルの世話を何くれとなく焼いている。エレンの依頼を受け、ウルスの正体を確かめるべく、リムとティッタと共にルヴーシュへ向かう。

ガスロン

ブリュース王国の公爵。ブリュース内乱の際にテナルディエ公爵との争いの中で行方不明となり、世間的には死亡したと思われている。現在はジスタート国内に身を寄せている。

バーバ=ヤガー

老婆の姿をした魔物。エリザヴェータに怪力を与えた。

ドレカヴァク

老人の姿をした魔物。かつて、テナルディエ公爵に仕えていたが、現在はジスタート国内に潜んでいる。

ヴォジャノイ

若者の姿をした魔物。

ティグル=ルムド=ウォルン

本編の主人公。十七歳。愛称はティグル。ブリュース王国の伯爵。客将としてジスタート王国のライトメリツに身を置いていたが、現在は記憶喪失となり、ウルスと名乗ってエリザヴェータに仕えている。



エレオノーラ=ヴィルターリア

七戦姫のひとり。十七歳。愛称はエレン。ジスタート王国の南西にあるライトメリツを治めている。竜具は長剣の“銀閃”アリファール。



リムアリーシャ

エレンの副官で、昔からの親友である。二十歳。愛称はリム。ティッタ、マスハスと共に、ウルスのいるルヴーシュへと向かう。



ティッタ

ティグルに仕える侍女。十六歳。現在はライトメリツに身を置く。リムたちと共にルヴーシュへ旅立った。

Chapter 1 – Those who return, those who visit

The clouds extending to the sky were thin and the ones which were stirred up by the wind and swayed soundlessly harked back to white fog. Even so, they concealed the sun and it was enough to block the sunlight.

Waiting for the far spring, the ground calmly endured the cold of winter. The hills and fields were buried in snow, trees and flowers were covered with frost and the river was eroded by ice.

Capital of the Brune Kingdom: Nice. Similarly, the Luberon Mountain soaring at its center was wrapped in cold and was standing quietly.

It was said that the Founder, King Charles met a spirit which the gods sent to this Mountain and was given the sacred sword Durandal and the magic horse Bayard.

Bayard was a horse with a black mane and red skin and it did not show fatigue even if it ran through a wasteland all day long. Durandal easily cut iron armor and shields and lifted strange curses. It was said to be able to also cut the likes of dragons, spirits and ghosts.

Charles carrying Durandal on his shoulder and riding Bayard went around many battlefields. And after piling up victories as such, he founded the Brune Kingdom.

Charles, in order to offer gratitude to the gods, built a shrine on the mountain top of Luberon. Since then, the shrine had been managed by a dozen of priests and passed time peacefully.

Now, three men and women were visiting that shrine. A young girl who wore white silk clothes on her delicate body and put on a mantle, and a man and a woman accompanying her.

After greeting the head of the shrine, they left the shrine without particularly having a fun talk. The three people's objective was not in the shrine, but outside.

"The cold of this season is quite severe. How about you warm yourselves for a little while? I also prepared wine."

The head of the shrine offered so, but the young girl thanked him and declined. As the head of the shrine said, the air drifting at the top of this mountain was cold enough to sting the skin.

The girl was about 16 or 17 years old. Having trimmed her pale golden hair around her shoulders, and despite her neutral features, there was a feminine softness in the roundness of her cheeks. She was carefully holding a bouquet wrapped in a white cloth.

She was a beautiful girl who let one feel dignity in her casual gestures.

Her name was Regin.

More precisely Regin Ester Loire Bastien Do Charles. She was the Princess of the Brune Kingdom and she governed the Kingdom on behalf of her father, the King who died last year.

The two persons waiting behind Regin were knights serving as guards. Both young being in their mid-twenties, they each wore a silver breastplate and hung a sword to their waist. The man's name was Claude and the girl's Serena.

The two people's faces being tensed was not only because of their duty as guards. This was because where they were heading now was an important place even to them.

In a place about ten steps away from the shrine, Regin stopped.

There was a grave there. It was still brand-new, and plain without an appropriate ornament. Beside the name Roland, only the short words "A knight among knights" were carved.

That alone was enough to describe the human called Roland.

The Knight Roland, who had the nickname of "Black Knight", acted as the young knight leader of the Navarre Knight Squadron who made the soldiers of neighboring countries tremble just by showing his figure, and died in the civil war of Brune that occurred last year. It was not death in battle. He was murdered by Duke Ganelon.

Though it was wondered whether Roland's corpse was left just as it was, the old Prime Minister Badouin secretly took it and it was buried here. This was because Roland was an abandoned child who had been picked up and raised by a shrine maiden serving in this shrine.

As she looked down at the grave, Regin spat out a white breath. When she put the bouquet in front of the grave, she joined her hands and prayed to the gods.

Roland did not leave that strong an impression on Regin. Though she had heard about his matchless bravery and loyalty, she knew that it was directed towards her father King Faron.

It was all right like that until the battle of Dinant last year. This was because in the circumstances where Faron was healthy and there was no shadow in his rule, and also where Regin herself pretended to be a Prince, she did not try to actively get involved with retainers, nobles and knights.

Even so, there were reasons why she came to offer flowers like this. One of them was that if it was her father the King, he would have certainly done so.

The other was because she was now in a position where she governed a country, and she keenly realized how reliable a person Roland was and held again a sense of respect.

The western border was especially noisy recently. The Sachstein Kingdom began to deploy 1000 to 2000 soldiers and was frequently setting skirmishes. They seemed to be probing about how the rule of a young princess was, and also about the western defense after Roland's death.

The Princess had talked only a little with Tigrevurmud Vorn about Roland. Called Tigre by those close to him, the youth with darkish red hair talked about the Black Knight in this way.

"Strong... He was a very strong person. And also a splendid man."

There were words full of real feelings. When he was considered a rebel due to the plot of Duke Thenardier and others, he had fought against the Navarre Knight Squadron led by Roland. He was one of the few people who fought Roland as an enemy while being a person of Brune, and learned of his fearfulness from direct experience.

For Tigre, Roland was not only a powerful foe, but also a benefactor.

At the time when the Muozinel army had invaded, the Knight Squadrons which were protecting various places of Brune gathered under Tigre. In addition to the fact that it was due to Mashas Rodant and Hugues Augres' appeal that they rushed to him, it was because there was Roland's appeal.

There had also times when Prime Minister Badouin and Mashas who assisted Regis now talked about the fact that if Roland were there, he would have definitely become a great help.

—I won't say that if you were alive.

The dead could not be revived. Be it Roland or Regin's father.

On behalf of those who were no longer in this world, they had to protect this country.

—Thank you for having protected this country.

As she deeply bowed to Roland's grave, Regin looked back. The two guards stood at a place precisely three steps away from her and they were attentively surveying the surroundings.

"Are you all right without even praying?"

Regin knew that those two respected Roland. Therefore, she asked as such, but Serena, not moving an inch, responded in a tone so calm as to feel curtness.

"Thank you for your consideration, Your Highness. However, I think that neglecting my duty as a guard for that will rather anger the Black Knight's soul."



Though Claude kept silent, he seemed to be of the same opinion as her.

"I understand. Well then, I shall also pray for your part."

When the Princess said so with a wry smile, she turned to Roland's grave. She joined her hands together once again.

Regin who finished her prayer to the gods left the mountain top followed by her two guards. They went down the mountain path which continued to the royal palace. Claude advanced several steps ahead and Serena stood side by side with Regin. The two of them did not utter even a single word.

While swaying her light golden hair to the winter wind, Regin looked at Serena with a sidelong glance.

—Jeanne was a little easier to get close to though.

While understanding that she should not compare them, Regin just thought about such a thing.

Jeanne was one of the Princess's guards at the time when she lied about her sex distinction and called herself Regnas. Regin learned various things from her, how to light a fire and a method to know a direction by looking at the stars shining in the night sky. Even vulgar old tales that even the teachers of the royal palace never talked about.

She died in the trip to protect Regin after the battle of Dinant.

"Your Highness, is there something on my face?"

As she noticed Regin's look, Serena turned a puzzled look. Regin shook her head.

"I'm relying on you, Serena. But, do not overdo it too much on your duty."

It was their duty to protect Regin even at the expense of their own lives. While understanding that, the Princess could not help saying so.

Serena had never displayed her emotions until then, but she opened her eyes wide in surprise. With a soft smile, she gave a small bow.

"I am sorry for having caused Your Highness to worry. Though I did not intend to overdo it, I shall exert myself even more so as not to trouble you in the future."

Though she had the feeling that she was strangely misunderstood, Regin nodded with a smile.

Then before long, they returned to the royal palace. Having appeared to welcome them was Prime Minister Pierre Badouin. The old Prime Minister who wrapped his body in gray official clothes respectfully bowed his head.

"Your Highness, it is good above all that you've come back safely."

If we have to speak about Badouin's features, the expression "like that of a cat" would be appropriate. On his roundish face, his gray mustache erectly extended to the right and left. Even his eyes slanted upwards, as expected, harked back to a cat.

"I only climbed the Luberon Mountain. Besides, there were Claude and Serena, too."

As Regin said so while laughing, the Prime Minister with a cat face turned his gaze to the two guards. Claude and Serena shook their heads. It meant that there was nothing noteworthy to report.

"Prime Minister. There is something I would like to speak about, could you come to my office?"

Regin's words were a little abrupt, but Badouin responded without showing any signs of anxiety.

"Understood. By the way, shall I also prepare warmed wine?"

Badouin had also happened to visit the shrine at the Luberon mountain top several times. He especially knew well the piercing cold of this season.

"Thank you. But I shall pass on alcohol. Can I ask for tea?"

It meant that it wasn't a little chat or the likes of small talk, but a serious one. While walking the corridor following Regin, Badouin called a court lady and ordered her to carry tea to the office.

They arrived at the office; only Regin and Badouin entered. The two guards stood watch outside.

Regin was the lord of this royal palace and there were many rooms for her. There was a living room and a game room for relaxation, a private room, bedroom and library. Of course, there were not only one living room and private room; there were multiple rooms with different sizes and ornaments.

But, the Princess liked an office that not too wide; decorated with only a few furnishings and a Red Horse Flag. Even when there was no work that should be dealt with immediately, she was often in her office. For Regin, it was a place where her mood settled down.

As Regin sat before the office desk, she recommended a chair to Badouin. The old Prime Minister bowed and sat down on the chair.

"What may it be? The thing you want to hear from these old bones."

"It is about Duke Ganelon and the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel)."

Regin directly cut to the chase.

Duke Ganelon was a noble who had governed the land of Lutetia located in the northern part of the Brune Kingdom before. The Ganelon House was a distinguished family which continued since the reign of the Founder Charles and you might say that it was one of the aristocrats representing Brune.

Last year, he conspired with Duke Thenardier and tried to assassinate Regin. Moreover, they made King Faron take a suspicious medicine which weakened him and considerably reduced his life span. Without that, Regin's father would have still been in good health.

Even that Ganelon was no longer there.

He, who fought Duke Thenardier and was defeated, set fire to the town Artishem and his own mansion. The townscape which existed for hundreds of years was wrapped in hell fire, many charred corpses were scattered about in his burned and collapsed mansion and the distinction about which was Ganelon's was not made in the end.

Spreading in the underground of that Artishem was the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel).

The Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel) was conveyed as the ground where the Founder Charles received a revelation. It was a very large structural space harking back to either a palace or shrine of old times, and there was a door which could be opened by only the imperial family.

In last year's civil war, Regin herself went to the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel) along with Tigre and company in order to prove that she was from royalty.

However, they encountered the hindrance of Duke Thenardier when they arrived at its door, and moreover, the ceiling collapsed and the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel) had been buried.

"Why was the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel) in the basement of Artishem — under Ganelon's feet?"

As she oozed out some anxiety, Regin asked Badouin.

Until today, Regin had never deeply thought about those things. It was not as if she had forgotten, but she was not able to have time to carefully think about it as she was pressed by her duty as the ruler. She suddenly remembered it because it was Ganelon who murdered Roland.

When Badouin received Regin's serious look straight on, he said after a short pause as he explored his memory.

"According to the myth and old documents of the founding of the country, it is said that the Founder Charles trusted the First Generation Duke Ganelon very much. That for Charles, Ganelon was an existence which he could be called his best friend. It was probably the outcome of that that he was given the land of Lutetia after getting to know the existence of the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel)."

"Would he be left Artishem and the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel) for just that reason?"

On the Princess's face which showed that she could not understand, the Prime Minister answered while adjusting his erectly extended mustache with a finger.

"According to a certain document, it seems that the First Generation Lord Ganelon was a priest. And that the reason why the Founder Charles gave him Lutetia was not known."

Regin opened her eyes wide to Badouin's words.

"A priest, you say...? I also studied the myths of the founding of the country as royalty, but it is the first time that I heard that the First Generation Lord Ganelon was a priest."

"Your Highness, it is not that you overlooked it. It is because it should only be written in the myths of the founding that he was Charles's best friend and a chief vassal."

Badouin did not deny Regin's words and nodded in a slow movement. To his attitude, the Princess knitted her brows as she felt that she could not understand.

"Were there any circumstances?"

"Although called a priest, it is totally different from the present priests. It is said that Ganelon the was someone who visited the mountains concealed in the depths of a deep snowy forest, who spoke not only to the gods, but also to spirits and fairies; borrowing their wisdom. Also that he was also quite knowledgeable on that kind of magic (sorcery)."

"Rather than priest, isn't it appropriate to call him a sorcerer or shaman..."

Regin unintentionally voiced out her honest impression. Badouin squinted and smiled wryly.

"Though I think the same thing as Your Highness, the people at that time were calling Ganelon a priest. Probably, even the duties requested from a priest were different from those of now."

"That's why it wasn't written in the myth of the founding, huh."

Regin finally consented. Anyone would probably think that the reputation, of the close and trusted friend of the Founder King who talked with spirits and that he also seemed very knowledgeable in magic, was bad. Badouin continued.

"Besides, it seems that it was until the third or fourth generation counting from the First that the Ganelon House was said to be a lineage of priests. Probably, while living as a noble of Brune, the things such as knowledge, custom and schooling as a priest disappeared without being inherited."

As the Brune Kingdom adjusted its form as a country, many manners and customs were also born among nobles. The Ganelon House probably cast aside the fact that they were priests while piling up generation after generation. Badouin explained so.

"This is only what I know, but was it in any way helpful to Your Highness?"

"Yes. Thank you, Badouin."

Regin smiled and expressed words of gratitude. It was not as if there was no longer anything she was concerned with, but anyway her doubt was dispelled. The Princess changed the topic.

"Speaking of which, how is the situation in Artishem?"

After the civil war ended, Regin who became the ruler of Brune naturally undertook the revival of Artishem, too. She sent soldiers and made them transport materials trying to rebuild the central city of the north.

"According to the report delivered last month, it has recovered to about one-third of its original state. In the first place, in the strategic position which links the center to the north, the flow of people is prosperous. It will regain its previous appearance after some time has been spent. And it seems that it is already a good time to start work on the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel)."

When Regin decided on Artishem's rebuilding, she issued instructions to leave the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel) buried with rubble as it is. This was because she thought that the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel) was something unrelated to people living in the town and that she should give priority to the reconstruction of Artishem itself.

However, Regin shook her head to Badouin's proposal.

"It can still be delayed, right? After all, there is no need to hurry with the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel). When spring comes, I will listen to the report again and even then..."

"Understood."

Suddenly, Regin removed her gaze from Badouin and cast it on the work desk. She remembered about Tigre. For Regin, the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel) was a place which had let soldiers die idly, and also a place which had made her loved one sad.

That loved one should have been in a foreign country as a guest General, but it was said that he fell into the winter sea and went missing. It was none other than a messenger of Zhcted that told so.

With the pretext to hear the story in detail, Regin had detained that messenger in one room of the royal palace. Though it was virtual confinement, the messenger who had probably prepared to receive a treatment of such degree had spent these several days without stating even one complaint.

Meanwhile, Regin had Mashas Rodant go to Zhcted to confirm the fact of Tigre's disappearance.

—Lord Tigrevurmud...

She thought that she did not mind in what kind of appearance, she just wanted him to be safe. She wanted to welcome him in the best way possible when he returned to Brune.

Regin, retaining anxiety and hope in her blue pupils, prayed to the gods in a subdued voice.

Though Badouin roughly guessed from the Princess's expression, he kept silent and watched over her.

This Prime Minister with a cat face understood well the fact that Tigre's existence was necessary for Regin in a lot of ways.

Badouin who left the office returned to his room which was in the royal palace.

The structure of the old Prime Minister's room was not so different from Regin's. Shelves which kept various documents and letters were installed on both sides of the wall, and a Red Horse Flag was hung at the center of the wall. There was a work desk and a chair looking old in front of it and a candlestick, while a mountain of documents waiting for settlement were piled up on the desk.

As Badouin lighted the candlestick with his own hands, he went around the desk and sat on the chair. After being ordered by the late King Faron, the Prime Minister had done this work almost every day.

As he was about to set his hands on the documents at once, the door was knocked on from outside. The Prime Minister with the cat face said 'come in' after stroking his mustache once.

Coming in was a civil official. He presented a letter to Badouin.

"It is from Nemetacum."

Badouin narrowed his eyes at the civil official's words. After stroking his mustache once again, he received the letter. The civil official bowed and left.

After confirming that the door was closed, Badouin looked over the letter silently.

Nemetacum was in the southern part of the Brune Kingdom. Though it was the land which Duke Thenardier had governed, after him and his son Zaian died last year, the royal family requisitioned it and a chief administrator dispatched by Regin was governing it.

He attempted to murder the King and the Princess. So, the Thenardier House should have been abolished, but due to some circumstances, it still continued.

One of the reasons was the grace period. If the Thenardier House was dissolved, a great number of people would have lost their job in one night and became homeless. In order to avoid that, Regin and Badouin made several choices and let the Thenardier House survive.

Another one was Regin's weakness as a ruler. At the time when Faron was in good health, Regin's shadow was thin and she had no certain accomplishments, either. Also about the reason why she had been brought up as a Prince, it was officially "because an oracle decided this".

The civil war ended, and among the noble lords who regained their calm, there were few who turned a skeptical look towards Regin. There were even those who were wondering whether she was the Zhcted Kingdom's puppet — a marionette.

Although Badouin and Mashas were making some people swear allegiance to the royal family as they steadily performed negotiations and persuasion, unpredictable situations continued.

If they were to speak of the Thenardier House's abolition in such circumstances, they would stimulate them (nobles not acknowledging Regin) more than needed. Even if there was a justifiable reason.

The territory of Duke Thenardier House was requisitioned, and with nobody succeeding it, it was destined to disappear even if left as it is. In that case, they decided to wait for a suitable time and abolished it.

It was said that there was seditious movement in the Thenardier House.

—They investigated Her Highness the Princess's personal life...?

In the letter that Badouin received just now, such a thing was concisely written.

The name of the letter's author was Gerard Augres. He was the son of Viscount Hugues Augres who governed Territoire in the east of Brune and a man who served as the secretary of the royal palace.

Ordered by Badouin, he was now in Nemetacum. Though he was made to go there to investigate whether the remnants of the Duke Thenardier House were moving suspiciously, Gerard splendidly seized their movement, investigated it and reported to Badouin.

According to Gerard's letter, it was Duke Thenardier's wife, a woman called Melisande who had made her move. She was Faron's niece, thus Regin's cousin.

She was in a position where she should have been charged with crimes as Thenardier's wife, but she avoided punishment thanks to her blood lineage. As for Regin, she could not bring herself to take the life of her cousin who lost her husband and her son, and also had no territory.

However, Regin and Badouin did not just leave Melisande as such. She was entrusted to a certain shrine of Nemetacum. Though they were thinking that it would be good if she was to spend the rest of her life peacefully in the shrine, it looked like their wish didn't come true.

When Badouin finished looking over the letter, he stared at one point in the air and lost himself in thought.



In the corner of a forest wrapped in the darkness of night, there were two youths.

It was an unusual scene. In a position where both of them were sitting on the ground, one was thrusting the point of his sword before the other. A tense atmosphere wrapped the two people and the bonfire flickering to the winter wind illuminated their faces in profile.

This place was the Lebus dukedom located in the northwest of the Zhcted Kingdom. It was within a forest which was at a distance of about one day on foot from its Imperial Palace. One koku had already passed after the day had set.

Being thrust at with the sword was a youth with darkish red hair who was around 16 to 17 years old. His clothes wore out here and there and considerable fatigue could be seen on his face.

His name was Urz. He was an attendant serving the Vanadis Elizavetta Fomina, the ruler of Lebus. Although called attendant, with no memory of (maybe) before ten days, the name Urz was a word which had finally come to his mind after he explored his memory.

Thrusting the sword at that Urz was a Muozinel youth with the characteristic brown skin. He was around 20 years old. He was tall, his nose and chin were thin, and his sharp look harked back to a wild beast. Unlike Urz, he wrapped his body in a traveling outfit.

This Muozinel person was Damad. He should be the benefactor who saved Urz from bandits, but when one thought that they were exchanging a conversation before the bonfire, Damad suddenly drew his sword and thrust it at Urz. As for Urz, it was more than incomprehensible.

—What the hell is this?

While staring at the tip of the drawn sword, Urz inwardly groaned.

“You’re Tigrevurmud Vorn, you say...?”

A voice tinged with hostility and some surprise leaked out from Damad’s mouth. After the hesitation of an instant, he tried to nudge the sword at Urz’s face. Urz suddenly threw back his body downward. Above the body of the youth facing upward, the drawn sword passed through empty space.

Not wanting to let him escape, Damad turned the point of the sword down. Although his face turned pale, Urz desperately extended his left leg. He kicked off the bonfire with all his strength.

Firewood collapsed and sparks flew. The flame swayed and burnt the leg of Damad who was near. The Muozinel youth briefly uttered a scream of pain. The sword which approached Urz’s throat strayed to the side.

Not overlooking that opening, Urz rolled on the ground horizontally and escaped from Damad’s sword. He raised his body and turned his back on Damad. Then, he jumped into the darkness lurking beyond the trees.

While being out of breath and stumbling repeatedly, he ran in the darkness delirious. One might say that it was fortunate that he didn’t hit the trunk of a tree.

His foot was caught to the root of a tree. Without even time for thinking “damn it!”, Urz flashily fell down. The little air which had accumulated into his lungs was spitted out along with a wordless scream.

“Uh ah...”

He couldn’t muster strength to stand immediately. His breathing was painful. His whole body was screaming. Sandwiched between the cold air and ground, Urz vacantly stared at the darkness.

Today, only things hardly believable as reality were occurring. It felt like he was made to see nightmares one after another.

Today in midday, Urz accompanied Elizavetta and they visited a shrine of old times. That shrine seemed to be a place with some unpleasant memory for her.

When they were going to leave the shrine, Lebus Knights showed up. They complained saying that Urz was evaluated beyond his ability, and they turned their swords not only to Urz, but also to Elizavetta, their lord. The knights were clearly not sane.

In addition, a suspicious old woman calling herself Baba Yaga showed up and confusion accelerated.

Elizavetta, while having no choice but knock down the knights, escaped into the shrine with Urz. But, the floor of the shrine collapsed and both of them fell underground.

Though they suffered only minor injuries because of Valitsaif, Elizavetta's Viralt which had protected them, the strange situation did not end there.

Underground, there was a dragon with a strange appearance possessing two heads. It was a malformed dragon called the Double Headed Dragon.

Although Elizavetta fought hard protecting Urz, she was forced into an unfavorable situation at the dragon's strength and there was also the fact that she was fighting in darkness.

It was at that time that Urz displayed a mysterious power.

A jet black bow, and an arrow made by getting power from Elizavetta's Thunder Swirl.

Using it, Urz killed the Double Headed Dragon.

In the brief time when they were relieved, Baba Yaga appeared once again and Urz was swallowed in darkness.

Then, when he came to himself, he was lying down all alone in a forest. The black bow had disappeared and Elizavetta was nowhere to be found.

Hardly able to move due to pain, fatigue and cold, it was Damad who introduced himself as a traveling merchant who had saved Urz who was about to be attacked by bandits.

While they were eating the rabbit that Damad had hunted around a bonfire, Urz revealed his identity. Then while they were exchanging a conversation, Damad suddenly asked.

[Do you know someone called Tigrevurmud Vorn?]

—That's right. It's that Tigrevurmud Vorn.

As his breathing settled down while he was thought back to what happened today, Urz finally became able to think calmly.

When he was asked by Damad, Urz answered that it was probably him.

That answer made Damad move. Even when he recalled Damad's lines when he had thrust the sword at him, there was no doubt.

"Tigrevurmud Vorn, huh..."

When muttered so, a light headache attacked Urz. But, many scenes did not float in his head like when he killed the Double Headed Dragon with the power of the black bow.

“—Now then, what should I do?”

Putting strength into his body which grew had cold, Urz raised his body. When he looked back, the light of a small flame could be seen ahead of the darkness where trees soared. It was the bonfire. Though he had intended to run desperately, actually it looked like it was only about 30 Alsins (about 30 meters) away from there.

Removing the soil on his clothes, Urz began to think. Why didn't Damad run after him? What should he (Urz) do?

There was no much time. This was because the situation where he had wounds all over his body whereas Damad had room to spare had not changed. Night deepened as time passed and the cold would probably make him suffer.

“Really, today is full of only incomprehensible things.”

But, he did not intend to fall in such a place. No matter what, he must return to the Imperial Palace, by Elizavetta's side.

He took a deep breath. He stared at the distant bonfire. He checked that his hands and feet moved. It's all right.

The light of a strong will dwelled within the youth's black pupils.

Urz gripped a sleeve of his clothes and tore them with all his strength. Even though the youth was injured in the battle again the dragon, thus was now weakened, he still had enough strength to be able to tear it as he wanted.

Just in case, he hid behind the trunk of a tree. Urz started preparations for a counterattack.

Urz ran away, and Damad was gazing at the depths of the darkness where trees stood in a row.

“I thought he was an absentminded fellow, but he's unexpectedly quick-witted.”

Though annoyance was contained in his voice, his anger was turned more to himself than to Urz. In a very short time, Damad had made two mistakes.

One was the fact that he drew his sword even though he still didn't clearly know whether Urz was Tigre.

And the other was that he hesitated after having thrust his sword at Tigre.

He shouldn't have drawn his sword at that stage. However, since he had drawn it out, he should have killed him at once.

As he wasn't able to do it, an opportunity arose and gave Urz the opportunity of a counterattack or escape. “I failed... If this was to be known by His Highness the King's younger brother, I wouldn't probably get off with just a reprimand.”

Damad was not a traveling merchant. He was one of the aides of the King's younger brother Kreshu Shaheen Baramir of the Muozinel Kingdom. The King's younger brother highly evaluated this youth and had high expectations from him as a warrior as well as a commander.

This time, the mission he was appointed to was to confirm Tigre's death, and kill him in case he was alive.

About ten days had passed since Damad infiltrated Zhcted pretending to be a traveling merchant. Until today, he had not obtained a decent clue concerning Tigre. While thinking whether or not he fell into the sea and died after all as the rumor said, Damad continued his trip.

“...As for the fact that I’ve frankly reacted after being told ‘it’s probably me’, even I got impatient.”

Although complaining, Damad’s black pupils didn’t drift away from the depths of the forest wrapped in darkness. A sword possessing a blade with a curve peculiar to Muozinel was grasped at his hand.

He was thinking that Urz would return.

—Just because he escaped in the forest doesn’t mean he’ll be all right. After all, there’s no way he can pass through the forest within this cold, and without light. He wouldn’t last even a quarter koku.

Even if Urz wrapped his body in an overcoat and stayed near the bonfire, the winter night cold would sneak in from a few gaps. Though Damad was a Muozinel person resistant to heat and weak to coldness, even if not him, this night air would kill Urz. Furthermore, Urz was weakened.

—If he doesn’t come back at this rate, there’s no helping if he drops dead in the forest. It’ll only means that he was an idiot. The problem is when he will return, but...

There, Damad interrupted his thinking. Something which plowed through darkness and cut the wind came flying.

It flew into the bonfire and flicked off one branch of firewood. A dry sound resounded and the flame flickered.

Sensing danger, Damad quickly lay on the ground. The cold stroke his chin.

After a short pause of about five counts, the air groaned again. A hard sound resounded near the young man’s right hand and something bounced. That something rolled on the ground after bouncing once more.

—A stone, huh!

Damad felt shivers. He did not shiver only because of the cold. Sweat damply streamed down his forehead. The Muozinel warrior was convinced that it was Urz’s doing.

— This is bad...

There was a bon-fire near him. It was a perfect mark for Urz who was lurking in the darkness.

However, Damad hesitated about putting out the fire. Here was inside a forest. There were probably beasts. If, for example, wolves were near, he would fall as easy prey to them.

Besides, putting out fire didn’t necessarily mean that he would stand advantageous. Both of them would just struggle in the darkness and while freezing from the cold, they would explore each other’s position. For Damad who assumed cold as a weakness, it was a development that he wanted to avoid.

A stone came flying again and hit the bonfire. Sparks rapidly scattered.

—That's quite a speed. The aim is good, too. I thought that he was considerably weakened though.

In a situation where if he made one wrong move, it would hit a nearby tree and rebound to him, Urz threw the stones as if he didn't worry about such a thing.

—It's not thrown by hand. So he tore off the hem of his clothes and made an improvised sling (stone-throwing string), huh.

If he was throwing with his hand, it shouldn't have flown linearly until here.

“Not bad.”

Damad spitted out a sigh of admiration.

Kick the bonfire, take Damad by surprise and escape into the forest. If it just ended with that alone, Damad would not have highly evaluated Urz.

That amnesic youth had immediately counterattacked. What's more, he had not challenged Damad who had a sword to close-range combat, which would be advantageous to him (Damad). He had hidden himself in the darkness and thrown stones.

—At that time when I saw him surrounded by bandits, I thought that he was just a dying person on the roadside.

Fighting spirit weakened from the Muozinel youth's black pupils.

Urz was without a doubt a warrior. And Damad did not dislike such a man.

—If it continues like this, it'll become a battle of attrition. Though it'll end up being my win...

Not out of difference in ability or skill. Urz was more worn out than Damad, and he also lacked equipment for the cold. By just keeping still, cold would take heat from his body.

But, Damad would probably not get off unscathed, either. It was ridiculous to get injured in such a boring (trivial?) fight. And above all, Damad would get nothing even if he was to win.

As expected, a fourth stone flew into the bonfire. As he was waiting for it, Damad quickly stood up. He advanced about ten steps with the bonfire behind him and thrust his sword between trees. He called out into the darkness.

“Urz! I want to speak with you. As proof, I'll put my sword here. Come back!”

As he shouted in a loud voice, Damad parted from the sword which he had stabbed into the ground returned near to the bonfire. He waited for Urz to appear.

Though Damad understood that it was a selfish excuse after having pointed his sword to Urz, he thought that Urz would probably take the bait. That man should able to perform such a calculation.

After about 50 or 60 seconds passed, a figure of a person dimly emerged from within the darkness.

“Take ten ... no, even five more steps away from the sword. Open your hands and raised them, too.”

The shadow emitted a voice full of strain. Damad did as he was told. "Raise your hands" meant that he was definitely careful of projectile weapons such as a stone or dagger.

Along with the sound of stepping on the ground, Urz showed up from the trees at last. He had twined a cloth smeared with soil around his right hand and was grasping a small stone in his left hand. In case Damad was to show a strange movement, he probably intended to immediately throw it at him.

While turning a look of caution to Damad, Urz pulled out the sword thrust into the ground. He fixed his breathing and said in a calm voice.

"Please tell me. Why did you suddenly attack me?"

It was the expected question. Damad spoke the lines which he had already prepared in his mind.

"It's because you said that you might be Tigrevurmud Vorn."

Urz gasped. He became anxious to the fact that something had probably happened between Tigre and Damad. After a short pause, the darkish red-haired youth asked.

"Did Tigrevurmud Vorn do something which incurred your enmity?"

"No. Though I can't tell you the details, there are various circumstances. I'm to kill or capture him alive."

Both hands still raised, the Muozinel young man stuck out his chest and answered indifferently. Urz stared at Damad with a dumbfounded face. He probably did not think that he would be so direct. However, Urz immediately pulled himself together and threw a new question.

"Then, why did you call me, even going as far as to throw away your sword? Be it killing me or capturing me alive, you should have just until I'm unable to move. Did you think that I would obediently obey if you explain?"

"Well, about that", Damad deliberately made a skeptical expression and said.

"Are you really Tigrevurmud Vorn?"

These words seemed to surprise Urz. The amnesic youth opened his eyes wide.

"...What are you trying to say?"

"It's just what I mean. You certainly said it. And I believed it for a moment, too. But thinking carefully, there is no evidence."

Urz, not moving an inch, was listening to Damad's words holding his breath. Damad vehemently spoke furthermore.

"Hey, Urz. Do you have anything proving that you're Tigrevurmud Vorn? Will there be anything if you return to the Imperial Palace of Lebus?"

Urz revealed a difficult expression and feebly shook his head. Damad inwardly heaved a sigh of relief. If he had said that there was something, he would have had to reconsider it again.

"You may be Tigrevurmud Vorn, or maybe not. What's more, you come with memory loss. It's really dangerous to move by only believing your words. It's like blindfolding a camel and setting it out to the desert."

To that sarcastic expression, Urz seemed to be offended and glared at Damad.

"Those lines are hardly thinkable from someone who had tried to kill me until a while ago."

"Then, I'll ask once again. Are you really Tigrevurmud Vorn?"

When Damad asked, Urz looked downwards as he was at a loss for an answer. The young man with brown skin took a small breath and smiled at Urz.

"Did I say too much? It's not like I'm threatening you. In the case that you aren't Tigrevurmud Vorn, I'll be a fool for having tried to kill a different person by jumping to a wrong conclusion. I'll ask you to forgive me for that."

At Damad who did not break his unabashed attitude, Urz sighed. As it became troublesome, he asked in a carefree tone.

"So, what do you intend to do with me?"

"I'll take you to the Imperial Palace of Lebus."

To Urz who asked while bracing himself, Damad plainly answered.

"Since there is no clear evidence, you're Urz who serves Lebus. I'll take it to the Imperial Palace and get 100 silver coins."

As Urz stared at the Muozinel young man with a dumbfounded face, he shook his head to both sides as he couldn't understand.

"For someone who tried to kill me, what make you think that you'll get the reward? It's obvious that I will complain to my superior and have you thrown in jail."

"If that's the case, I'll leave you here. And you should just return to the Imperial Palace by yourself. If you can, that is."

Damad scornfully laughed, and Urz gave a small groan as he hit a painful place¹¹.

Though this forest was at a distance of about one day on foot from the Imperial Palace, it was a place which he was not familiar with. He didn't even know which direction to walk to arrive at the Imperial Palace.

In addition, with neither food nor water, he would only have an improvised stone-throwing string (sling) as a weapon. It was doubtful whether Urz could get out of this forest alone.

However, Urz still revealed a wary expression and turned a suspicious gaze to Damad.

"Didn't you think that I may break the promise after I return to the Imperial Palace?"

"I'll think about it again when it happens. Now, what do you say? Do you ride on my proposal?"

Wind blew. The flame of the bonfire flickered and illuminated the two men's faces from below.

Urz did not answer immediately. However, he reached a conclusion before the time of about ten counts. Staring at Damad, he sighed for the ninth time in this night.

"Understood. I will have you guide me."

"It's a deal."

As Damad laughed and said, Urz turned eyes mixed with sarcasm to the Muozinel young man.

"Which reminds me; you said that you are a traveling merchant. That's a lie, isn't it?"

"No matter what, as long as one can make a trade, he's a splendid merchant."

He was a voluble man to the utmost. Urz smiled wryly and was about to return the sword which he held in his hand to Damad. But, not only did the black-haired Muozinel young man not accept it, but he also gave its sheath to Urz.

"You may have that. Consider it as proof of trust."

Even without a sword, Damad still had a bow, and also a dagger. It was not as if he had no confidence in hand-to-hand fighting. Even if some unexpected situation occurred, he had confidence that he could deal with it.

"Understood. Then, I'll do so until we arrive at the Imperial Palace."

Afterwards, when the two men gathered the firewood which flew around, they spent the night while taking watch alternatively.

You don't know when a beast will approach in the forest at night. It was also necessary to be careful so as not to let fire go out. However the feelings towards the other party were, they should cooperate with each other in this place.



At the time when Urz and Damad decided to cooperate for the time being, in a corner of the Imperial Palace of Lebus, two men were facing each other with pale faces.

One was a knight in his prime called Naum who somewhat let hardships drift under his eyes. The other was an aged man called Lazarl who wrapped an official outfit on his slim figure and carefully fixed his pure white hair. Both of them were people whom Elizavetta deeply trusted.

"Hasn't Vanadis-sama return yet?"

Lazarl said as his face turned pale. Naum nodded with a painful expression.

It was unusual for Elizavetta to go out for a walk. However, if she did not come back even when the moon rose highly, this was the first time that there was no communication.

Especially this time, she had taken Urz. When it came to the soldiers and court ladies working in the Imperial Palace, trivial rumors would probably spread in the Imperial Palace. Imagining such a scene, Lazarl and Naum wanted to hold their heads in their arms.

"How many people are there who know about this?"

"Those whom I can assert that they know are only you, Lazarl-dono and I. We can give careful instructions to those who don't know yet, so..."

Naum answered with a serious face.

For example, if they explained that "Vanadis-sama came back from a different gate" to the gatekeeper, they could deceive them for the time being.

They only had to say to the court ladies who took care of her personal needs that "there was business and she took a rest in another room today", too. As there were actually urgent matters quite often in the position of Vanadis, the court ladies were also used to it.

"The problem is how to search for Vanadis-sama..."

Elizavetta did not tell them where she went.

Since there were originally many cases when she wanted to be alone, thus she took a walk, neither Naum nor Lazarl had tried to find out where she would go by questioning her forcibly.

"If we do a large-scale search, many people will become aware of Vanadis-sama's absence. We must avoid that no matter what."

Lazarl nodded at Naum's words.

"Much more, to think it's at such time."

The door of the castle town was closed and the moon rose highly in the sky. It was the time when many homes had already gotten it over with dinner. If they were to move soldiers at such a time, it would be more than just attracting the people's attention.

"Say, Naum. How many soldiers can you move by your instructions without causing uproar?"

"If it's to be quietly, I would say about fifty."

"Then, it doesn't matter. Could you have them move anytime soon?"

If they knew Elizavetta's whereabouts, Naum and Lazarl would have probably moved the soldiers immediately. The fact that her whereabouts were unknown was the problem. If they were to recklessly move the soldiers at midnight, both of them understood that it would only be a wasted effort.

“How about waiting for the daybreak and moving them?”

“We would have no other choice but to ask the neighboring villages. We can make up something along the lines ‘though Vanadis-sama left for a long-term inspection, we had to have her come back to the Imperial Palace on urgent matters.’”

“There doesn’t seem to be any other ways...”

Naum traced the wrinkles of his face and sighed.

“At any rate... Didn’t you think about what could possibly have happened, Lazarl-dono?”

Naum asked in a serious tone. It’s not only that he wanted to borrow the old civil official’s wisdom. There was also the need to be unified concerning this point in case of an unexpected situation. Lazarl unusually frowned, too.

“Many people will think that Urz kidnapped Vanadis-sama.”

“Which means that you have a different opinion, right Lazarl-dono?”

As Naum said as to make sure, Lazarl distorted his mouth in displeasure.

“Of course. Certainly, Vanadis-sama is fond of Urz. But, she has wisdom not suitable for her age. She knows the line that she should keep. Even if Urz is to say something, she won’t do something like straying away from the path with it.”

“I’m relieved to hear these words.”

Naum said while stroking his chest with a sigh of relief. It was his true intention. If his opinion was to oppose this old man’s gathering up (unifying) the civil officers, the confusion of Lebus would further increase.

In that way, the two men welcomed morning without a wink of sleep.

It was at the time where day broke that the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl who was their master came back.

She did not showed up from the main gate leading to the castle town of the rampart surrounding the Imperial Palace, but from the back gate located in a place which was not conspicuous.

Naum and Lazarl who received the report rushed to the back door and welcomed the Vanadis. But, the two men found no words to say as soon as they caught sight of Elizavetta’s figure.

Her red hair was disheveled, holes were also opened in many places on her purple dress and both the sleeves and cuffs were torn off. Her white skin was also smeared with mud and there were many wounds. There were also no shoes, she was barefoot. She tightly grasped the Thunder Swirl, her Viralt in her left hand and was dragging it.

Her Rainbow Eyes of gold and green, although stagnated by fatigue, showed a winding of violent emotions. If it was a weak person of mind, he would not even be able to look directly into her eyes.

Elizavetta had never shown such a shameful sight even after an intense battle.

The horse that she was riding was similarly dirty and its mane was disheveled like an old brush. More than ten helmets were tied with a thin rope to the saddle. The helmets were dirty and damaged as if she had just picked them up from a battlefield. There were some which were squashed as if having been struck by a hammer.

And, she was alone. There was not Urz.

Naum and Lazarl were speechless to the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl with too much fierce an appearance.

“—I just came back”

As Elizavetta said with a penetratingly cold voice, the two men finally came to their senses. It was not only those two. Even the gatekeepers protecting the back door, and the soldiers who saw the figure of the red-haired Vanadis equally showed the same reaction, too. No one was able to hide his surprise.

“I will call a doctor!”

As he changed his facial expression and said so, Naum went to call a doctor in a great hurry. Though he himself did not have to move and it should've been enough for him to send a soldier, confusion made him do so.

“What happened...?”

The voice of the old civil official who asked so to his lord was trembling. The atmosphere released from Elizavetta's whole body was similar to that of a wounded beast and in no way something before which you could simply speak. Even so, Lazarl's sense of responsibility as a retainer and his feeling to console the Vanadis outweighed the shiver.

But Elizavetta, not answering her retainer's question, one-sidedly said.

“Let the horse rest. And then — polish these helmets.”

When she turned a glance to the helmets, mixed feelings flashed across Elizavetta's pupils. However, Lazarl was the only one who noticed it. The thin, old civil official respectfully bowed.

“As you wish.”

Lazarl changed his thoughts. Even though his mind was filled with numerous questions, pressing the lord full of bruises for an answer is not what a retainer should do.

Besides, Elizavetta did not seem to have lost her sanity. On her expression which stared at the helmets, there was a sense of grief, though small.

Lazarl issued instructions to the gatekeepers and soldiers nearby. When Elizavetta glanced at the soldiers, she stuck out her chest and proudly began to walk. Lazarl followed after her.

The red-haired Vanadis entered the Imperial Palace. Lazarl guessed that she seemed to be going to her bedroom. Then, Lazarl finally remembered about Urz.

“What about Urz?”

Why was that youth not here?

“Urz is not here.”

As she replied only that in a curt tone, Elizavetta suddenly changed the topic.

“These helmets—”

She said with her back turned on him as such. As Lazarl failed to hear, he ran up with short steps (trots) to be immediately nearby Elizavetta.

“Those helmets are those of knights who had worked in this Imperial Palace. There were fifteen, but I wasn’t able to bring back all of them.”

Lazarl looked up at Elizavetta with a befuddled face. He was not able to immediately understand what she said.

They arrived at her bedroom. When Elizavetta took the bell on the desk with her hand as soon as she entered her bedroom, she rang it with rough hands.

The court lady who appeared at a quick pace failed to bow before the opened door. To her master’s ghost-like appearance, the court lady stood stock still with a face likely to faint at any time. Although Lazarl sympathize with her from the bottom of his heart, he said on behalf of his master.

“Vanadis-sama is tired. Could you prepare a bucket of hot water, a cloth to wipe the body, a change of clothes and wine? Someone else has gone to call the doctor.”

Lazarl’s calm attitude and words somehow made the court lady pull herself together.

“I-I shall prepare them at once.”

Although her tongue got entangled, the court lady deeply bowed and disappeared in front of the bedroom.

“Thank you for your work.”

When Elizavetta returned words of gratitude to the old civil official, she draw a chair and sat.

“Lazarl. I understand that you are confused, but can you wait a little more? It would save me the trouble to talk again about it after Naum came, right?”

Then, Naum showed up with the doctor before long. The doctor was a small-sized old woman. Both of them seemed to have rushed very hastily; their faces were covered with sweat and they were heavily breathing. Slightly later than Naum and the doctor, the court lady brought a cloth and a bucket filled with hot water.

“Before I begin the treatment, she must first change your clothes. Excuse me Lazarl-sama, Naum-sama. But could you please wait outside?”

“I don’t mind.”

Elizavetta narrowed her eyes and said so. As a Vanadis, she was not embarrassed from changing her clothes in front of her retainers. Though she might have such an intention, Lazarl, not breaking his attitude as a retainer, politely bowed his head.

“Vanadis-sama. As you see, Naum is out of breath. Could you allow him to take a break while you are treating your wounds?”

Elizavetta turned her gaze to Naum who wiped sweat with his sleeve, and smiled.

“Understood. Then, wait outside.”

Lazarl winked at Naum. The two men bowed and left the Vanadis’ bedroom. They looked at each other and sighed deeply.

In reality, both of them wanted time to settle down.

Even though a half koku has not passed yet since Elizavetta came back to the Imperial Palace, they kept on being surprised. They, who spent a night without a wink of sleep, somewhat endured it. Even if they heard Elizavetta’s story from here on, they wanted to prepare mentally at least.

Lazarl looked up at the knight in his prime standing beside him.

“Naum. What on earth do you think happened to Vanadis-sama? Even if something happened, she is injured to that extent.”

Naum made a wry face and shook his head from side to side.

Even when surrounded by 100 or 200 soldiers in a battlefield, wielding Valitsaif, her Viralt and easily defeating the enemy was Elizavetta Fomina.

Naum had many times seen her standing at the vanguard of soldiers and resolutely fighting. Even in the vortex of a fierce battle, the enemy’s swords, spears, shot arrows and pebbles were not able to injure Elizavetta.

—*No, only one thing...*

A nightmarish scene crossed Naum’s mind.

Naum suddenly recalled the battle with a large group of pirates who lined up their ships and fought with Legnica around autumn. About the huge white monster which suddenly appeared on the pirates’ flagship.

The monster which the Vanadis of Legnica Alexandra Alshavin a.k.a Sasha and Elizavetta defeated at last. In that fight, Elizavetta who returned to an allied ship holding Sasha had unusually suffered serious injuries.

He thought that if there was someone or something able to injure a Vanadis, it was only such a monster.

“What’s wrong?”

Naum came to his senses at Lazarl’s words. He shook his head.

“It’s the sadness of this body ^[2] which lacks in imagination. I don’t understand at all. Besides, we have no choice but wait for Vanadis-sama’s words.”

Naum said so because he was afraid of speaking of the existence of that monster. That was not limited only to him, but it was also the feelings shared by almost all the soldiers of Legnica and Lebus who participated at that naval battle.

Though his face turned pale, Naum changed the topic.

“By the way, there were helmets tied on the saddle of Vanadis-sama’s horse... All of them belonged to the knights of our dukedom.”

“Without a doubt?”

Lazarl strongly emphasized. Naum nodded.

“Yes. For the time being, I ask to check whether there were knights whom we cannot contact. It will be difficult to know that by the end of today.”

“That’s enough for now. Vanadis-sama will probably talk about that, too.”

At that time, a voice calling the two men could be heard from within the bedroom. It looked like the treatment was over. Naum observed etiquette and knocked on the door; he then opened it after waiting for Elizavetta’s response.

Elizavetta who had changed into a new dress was sitting on a chair. A white cloth cut small was put on her cheek and bandages peeped through her shoulders and arms. Though her face was filled with fighting spirit, she wasn’t able to completely wipe away the painfulness.

The black whip which is her Viralt was roundly bundled and was hanging to the right side of her waist. Naum who noticed that suspiciously narrowed his eyes. Elizavetta was right-handed and always hung her Viralt on the left side of her waist. It was not like she couldn’t handle it even like this, but it might be difficult.

However, he could not afford to ask about it. There were a lot of other things that he must ask.

“Vanadis-sama. Though the treatment is over, it does not mean that you will be fine right away. Please, rest properly. It is important to cure an injury.”

When the old doctor said so and respectfully bowed, she left the bedroom accompanied by the court lady.

There were now only three people Elizavetta, Naum and Lazarl left in this place.

"I cause you two to worry by coming back late. I am sorry."

Elizavetta said. However, something like guilt (regret) could be observed neither on her expression nor in her tone. The knight and the old civil official felt rather relieved to that.

"Vanadis-sama. Could you tell us what you have done and what happened?"

To Lazarl's words, Elizavetta explained what happened after she went for a walk with Urz yesterday.

The Vanadis of Rainbow Eyes talked about the fact that knights appeared and pointed their swords to Urz and her when they happened to pass by the front of a certain old, rotted shrine.

"They said that I unfairly evaluated Urz highly and tried to kill Urz. Urz and I tried to persuade them, it didn't work... We first escaped into the rotted shrine. At that time, a dragon appeared."

"A dragon?"

Lazarl opened his eyes wide. It abruptly became a story hard to believe. Although Lazarl had lived nearly three times as long as Elizavetta, he had never met a dragon until now. However, he thought that if it was not an existence like a dragon, it would be impossible to injure her this much.

"We killed the dragon, but the floor of the shrine collapsed as it could not withstand it. There was an underground passage in the shrine, and Urz and I fell there... I was able to come out from the underground passage, but I had lost sight of Urz."

Anyway, Elizavetta who came out to the surface found her horse. It didn't run away and it might also be said that it was fortunate that it did not fall prey to a wild beast.

Elizavetta went to a nearby village, and ordered the village chief to quickly gather people and returned to the place where the knights' corpses were. Although the sun went down and the area became dark, the red-haired Vanadis promised a reward and moved the villagers.

There was a reason why Elizavetta was so much in a hurry.

When they arrived near the rotted shrine, most of the corpses were eaten by beasts and birds and their horrible appearances were exposed to the meadow. Other than wolves, weasels, and foxes, crows and eagles also ate the corpses.

Elizavetta made the villagers transport the corpses; they waited till dawn, dug holes near the village and buried them altogether.

However, she collected only the helmets as mementos, tied them onto the horse's saddle and came back. But, since there were also helmets smashed to pieces, she was not able to retrieve all of them.

Elizavetta's story's contents were enough to make the two experienced men be at a loss for words.

Though her voice was indifferent (serene), Naum and Lazarl could feel the Vanadis's restrained anger. After a short pause, Elizavetta opened her mouth.

"Naum. Are there knights who have disappeared since yesterday afternoon? There should be 15."

"We are currently investigating. I shall have it confirm by the end of today."

Naum suppressed his surprise and answered so. Though he could only give an uncertain reply when he had talked with Lazarl, he changed it now that it had become such circumstances. It was necessary to make it clear even one koku early.

"After confirming it, what will you do ...?"

Lazarl asked in a careful tone. If Elizavetta's story was right, they would be rebellious retainers who pointed their blades to their master. Not only was it natural even if they were executed on the spot, depending on the situation they must also take some dispositions with the bereaved families.

To the old civil official's question, the Vanadis diverted her look. She answered while staring at her right arm.

"They lost their life in the fight with the dragon. Let's put (leave) it as such. Have solatia [\[a\]](#) and their helmets handed to the bereaved family."

"That is..."

Lazarl hesitated. For measures taken by a ruler, it was on the contrary too naïve. However, the old civil official could not say any more than that. This was because the eyes of different colors sharply glared at him.

"Are you saying that anyone will be troubled with these measures?"

"It is my humble opinion that it will not do well for the future to make a precedent as to forgive those who turned their blades to their lord."

Although Lazarl was flinching, he desperately rebutted. However, the Vanadis of Rainbow Eyes indifferently shook her head.

"What you say is quite true, Lazarl. But, think about it a little. I said that the knights were dissatisfied with Urz's treatment, but why did they attack at the time when I was together with Urz?"

At Elizavetta's words, Lazarl and Naum frowned and lost themselves in thought. It was certainly strange. If it was Urz alone, there should have been an opportunity to aim at him anytime.

"I think that they were not sane (conscious). And there is someone who instigated them."

This means that there was someone who tempted the knights. It was a conclusion that they could agree with. Naum stared at Elizavetta with a serious expression.

"I will find out who that person is without fail."

“Please, do so. Lazarl, you are also fine with that, right?”

Lazarl also nodded. The knights were manipulated by someone. The truth was that it was something that only Elizavetta could know. In that case, she would not accept any more objections. He seemed to have thought so.

After that, Elizavetta ordered to look for Urz.

“I don’t think that Urz died.”

“Understood. I will dispatch the soldiers and made them search around the rotted shrine.”

Naum answered. It was by no means compulsory. This knight in his prime also held affection for Urz.

“Well then Vanadis-sama; please rest your body for today. We will deal with things from here on.”

Saying so, Naum and Lazarl were about to leave, but Elizavetta hailed only the old civil official. Although Lazarl made a wondering face, he remained in the bedroom.

Elizavetta showed a perplexed attitude, but she immediately shook off her hesitation and stared at Lazarl.

“Lazarl. Do you know someone named Baba Yaga?”

“...Do you mean that Baba Yaga who comes out of old folklores and fairy tales?”

It was no wonder that Lazarl asked back with a dubious face. It was that sudden a question.

Baba Yaga was an existence known even before the Kingdom called Zchted was established.

It was said that she was a spirit, or even a fairy or a monster. There was also the theory that she gathered many souls and took the appearance of an old woman.

It was said that she was worshipped and enshrined like the gods in old times. It was told that she granted power to those praying to her and cursed them in return. Anyway, it was certain that she was an inhuman being.

To Lazarl’s words, Elizavetta nodded without smiling.

“Yes, that Baba Yaga. There are probably many old shrines, which enshrined Baba Yaga, in Lebus. Can I have you investigate those places? As soon as possible.”

The old civil official was more and more perplexed. This should not be time to do something like that.

“I know what you want to say.”

Elizavetta said as she read what Lazarl was thinking from his expression.

“But, it is necessary for me now. And, this isn’t something I can ask anyone.”

It was an oppressive tone, but Lazarl correctly understood that her words were not an order, but a request. It looked like irritation, impatience and regret blurred in her pair of eyes.

The old civil official felt the necessity of seriously considering this request. He changed his expression and straightened himself.

It was by no means a suggestion. It was necessary for this red-haired Vanadis.

“If Vanadis-sama goes as far as to say that, I shall investigate them at once. However, I think that there are quite many. Should I report it after having checked to some extent?”

When he stated his opinion like that, Elizavetta sighed as she felt relieved.

“Yes... Please report just tomorrow night. Then, I will decide depending on the report’s contents.”

“Understood.”

Lazarl bowed and was going to leave. But, he suddenly changed his mind and turned to his lord.

He had a doubt. He was also irritated about her not having talked about it. However, his feelings were secondary. More than that, there was something which he had to tell her.

“Vanadis-sama. Though there is no need to state it now, I had served in this Imperial Palace since the time of the previous Vanadis-sama.”

Elizavetta frowned. Lazarl continued.

“I know that for a ruler, there are secrets that he cannot talk about to any retainer and can do nothing but hold them alone. And I do not intend to say something like confiding. However, I would like you not to forget that we are here for Vanadis-sama.”

With a face which could not hide her surprise, Elizavetta stared at the old civil official who deeply bowed his head. The red-haired Vanadis slightly loosened her expression and let a smile blur on her lips.

“Thank you, Lazarl”

This time for sure, the old civil official with gray hair bowed and left. When he came out to the corridor, fatigue weighed on his whole body. However, Lazarl straightened his back and began to walk straight looking ahead. For a master much younger than him, he could not raise complaints.

—So, the problem that I must handle at once is that after all, huh...

Something bitter filled Lazarl’s mind. About the fact of the knights having attacked Elizavetta and Urz, it was necessary to think about how to deal with it.

Fifteen humans died. Not in a war, but a private affair. Even if they could hide it for several days, it would eventually come to light. Would it be believed if they said that the knights were killed by a dragon?

What Lazarl feared the most was that they would be rumors going around that Elizavetta had so much affection for Urz that they killed the knights who bore animosity towards him.

There would be a minority who would have an interest to the truth. Many people would be satisfied with a rumor of their liking. Lazarl who worked in the Imperial Palace for a long time knew that well.

—I must at least avoid Vanadis-sama's honor being ruined.

To that end, he should make an outline (hand out) easy to understand and quickly circulate it.

If he made it look like a personal quarrel between Urz and the knights, it would be quick, but unnatural. Even if Urz had outstanding bow skill, it would probably be impossible to fight and win head on against fifteen people.

—Besides, with that way, Urz will no longer be able to stay in Lebus...

It has only about ten days since Urz began to live in Lebus. For most people of the Imperial Palace, he was a stranger. It goes without saying for which side the people's sympathy would gather between Urz and the knights.

He had to make up a story so that the animosity of the knights' bereaved families and the people serving in the Imperial Palace did not turn not towards Elizavetta and Urz.

"But in the worst case scenario, we will have to cast away Urz..."

In the case that it looked like blame was concentrating on Elizavetta, he would make Urz bear the full brunt of it. Lazarl decided so.

Elizavetta would probably not be able to decide. And Naum would surely hesitate. Therefore, he must do it. Lazarl did not hate Urz, but if it is for Elizavetta, he would not hesitate to sacrifice the darkish red-haired youth.

—If possible, I don't want such a thing to happen. But, is Urz alive? If so, where is he...?

Not revealing at all such thoughts and worry on his expression, Lazarl walked down the corridor.

When she was alone in her bedroom, Elizavetta lay down on her bed that had a canopy.

There was not the dignified expression as a Vanadis, which she showed in front of subordinates, there. It was only the face of an exhausted girl.

"—It's really troublesome to pile up lies one after another."

Her chest hurt as she remembered Lazarl's words.

She had not told them about Baba Yaga's existence because she thought that even if she explained, not only would they not believe it, but it would also only confuse them; but that was not only it.

This was because she held the determination of slaying her with her own hands. Fighting spirit was not lost from the Rainbow Eyes which could be said to be Elizavetta's peculiarity.

Furthermore, there was one more reason. Elizavetta slightly moved her head. Her eyes of different colors right and left were turned to her right arm. Fear, irritation and regret blurred in her pair of eyes.

She did not want anyone to know about this right hand.

When she was given it, she certainly thought that it was an unknown, fearful power.

But, if she were to say that she did not rely on this power at all, it would be a lie.

When she fought the Vanadis Eleonora Viltaria a.k.a Ellen of LeitMeritz and even when she confronted a demon like Torbalan, she relied on her right hand's power. Especially regarding Ellen, if it was the power of a single blow, she could even hold a firm belief that she would not lose.

She had not imagined it to be such a disgusting thing, too.

She even thought that it would be preferable to cut off her right arm, but she gave up after thinking. By doing so, there was no guarantee that she would be released from this curse. If for example, the curse were to transfer to the left arm after cutting off the right arm, she would no longer be able to fight against Baba Yaga.

Elizavetta's right hand naturally extended to the Thunder Swirl hung to her waist. The red-haired Vanadis who noticed that consciously extended her left hand and gripped the Viralt.

—Still, why doesn't Baba Yaga make a move?

If she was to kill her (Elizavetta), wouldn't it be a perfect opportunity now that she was injured and tired? And yet, the old demon woman hadn't shown even once before Elizavetta since then.

Be it when she spent the night unable to sleep in the village yesterday or even when she waited for dawn and returned to the Imperial Palace, the red-haired Vanadis could not get rid of her uneasiness.

When she thought that villagers and soldiers working in the Imperial Palace might be controlled by Baba Yaga and attack her just like the knights, she could not relax her guard.

It was so even now. Even though she was tired to the extent that she wanted to sleep as such, her emotions were highly strung and her consciousness was clear. She was standing ready to be able to deal with it whenever her crime might be exposed and she might be invaded.

Although so cautious of humans, she resolutely stopped by a village, and having also returned to the Imperial Palace like this was due to her awareness of being the Vanadis ruling Lebus.

Without even holding a funeral for the poor knights, she could not do something like taking action without seeing Naum and Lazarl. Moreover, even if they had been manipulated by the old woman demon, she had resolved herself that she would have to dirty her hands as their master.

But though should it be that she was fortunate, nothing had happened so far.

Or, was it because she dealt a blow to the demon in the fight of the underground passage? She was not able to save Urz, but there was a clear response in the Veda at that time. Though it was dangerous to think optimistically, Baba Yaga might also be healing her wounds now.

—I must destroy that demon with my own hands by any means.

It was for that purpose that she asked Lazarl to investigate the rotted shrine. Since she did not know where Baba Yaga was, she could do nothing but investigate the places where she might be one by one.

Not having asked Naum, but Lazarl was because she thought that the old civil official would be more suitable judging from the ability needed, but there was also the fact that it was hard for her to ask Naum.

Naum had seen the white demon Torbalan in the fight against the pirates.

Of course, he should not know what kind of conservation Elizavetta and Torbalan exchanged. It was because at that time, only she, Sasha, and Torbalan were on the flagship of the pirate ships.

Even if he has very good hearing, there was no way that their conversation would have been heard in that battlefield wrapped in the sound of weapons and roar of waves. Even so, Elizavetta hesitated about asking Naum.

Suddenly, the edge of her view vacantly shone. The black whip which her left hand was grasping was tinged with a pale light. As if cheering Elizavetta.

Vaguely realizing what her Viralt wanted to convey, the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl chuckled. Valitsaif appealed to her not with words, but with a modest light that she rest her body.

“Thank you. Then, I will sleep a little.”

Elizavetta quietly closed her eyes. If danger was to approach her, the Thunder Swirl would probably tell her immediately. Since there was also no enemy movement, she should sleep now rather than be thinking.

—Urz... Be safe.

Before long, she began to leak sleeper’s breathing.



It was a room rejecting all lights and diligently smearing darkness.

There were two shadows inside where dry air drifted. One was a small-sized old man who wrapped his body in a black robe. He was sitting at the center of the not so large room without moving an inch. His eyes were quietly closed. He seemed to be either absorbed in thought or sleeping.

The other was a medium-sized young man. He twined a green cloth around his short black hair, hung down his shoulders and was clad in thick clothes which treated fur at the collar and sleeves.

He held a small leather bag in his left hand and was leaning on the wall. He occasionally thrust his right hand in the leather bag, took out something and carried it to his mouth with a smile.

It was a gold coin that he gnawed. With familiarity (ease) as if eating a pastry, the young man chewed the gold coin and swallowed it.

The old man's name was Drekavac. The young man's was Vodyanoy. The two of them looked like humans, but it was not so. If you wondered why they took the appearance of humans, it was only because it was more convenient this way. After all, humans are prosperous on the current earth.

"Have you found him?"

As he swallowed the gold coin, Vodyanoy asked Drekavac. That something with an old man's appearance did not answer. When Vodyanoy shrugged his shoulders, he took out a new gold coin from the leather bag.

The indoor air suddenly flowed, and unnaturally swirled even though there was no wind.

While the young man quickly threw the gold coin to within his mouth, he turned his eyes to one point of the space. The old man also opened his eyes and looked there.

The darkness which lurked ahead of the two people's stares soundlessly split open and one shadow appeared as if pushed out from the interior. It was a small-sized old woman who wrapped her body in a black robe and held a shabby broom.

The robe was like an old rag torn off innumerable and the tip of the broom was also disheveled as if having been chewed by a beast. The breathing which could be heard from the inside of the hood was rough, too.

"—Wow, look here."

Vodyanoy opened his eyes wide and stared at the old woman who crouched on the floor. Though Drekavac did not emit a single word, surprise could be seen in his eyes.

"You has been beaten quite flashily, eh Yaga-baasan."

As he twisted his lips, Vodyanoy grinned at the old woman — Baba Yaga. Baba Yaga did not answer right away and just concentrated on adjusting her breathing.

While the two men were watching, the old woman raised her body after about a count of 20. Seeing that, Vodyanoy unnaturally squared off. If it was that Baba Yaga that he knew, then she would mercilessly hit him with her broom after this.

But, the old woman stopped at only giving a sharp glance at Vodyanoy and sat down on the spot holding her broom. She said while scratching her hooked nose.

“Dear me. I have no words to rebut this time. It’s as you see after all.”

Although Vodyanoy found her reaction unexpected, he asked Baba Yaga.

“The current master of Thunder Swirl, was she that strong?”

The old woman demon turned a sharp gaze at her two comrades from the interior of the hood covering her eyes.

“—The “Bow” was there.”

Astonishment became an intangible wave and soundlessly stirred up the darkness. Vodyanoy almost dropped the leather bag and Drekavac slightly moved.

“Hasn’t he sunk in the sea?”

“I thought that he was probably alive somewhere, but... So he was in Lebus, huh.”

The young man’s voice contained surprise and a smile similar to that of admiration also surfaced on the old man’s lips. Waiting for the two men to settle down, Baba Yaga bowed her head to Drekavac.

“Sorry, Drekavac. I have let the dragon I borrowed from you die.”

The Double Headed Dragon which the old woman demon sent to Urz and Elizavetta in the shrine’s underground belonged to Drekavac. If only Urz wasn’t there, the Double Headed Dragon would have probably devoured Elizavetta.

Drekavac answered without letting any feelings show on his face.

“No. Just knowing that the “Bow” is alive and is in Lebus is a good harvest. But, I never thought that someone like Baba Yaga would suffer such serious injuries.”

“I completely hid my presence. I thought that he was just a human youngster until he defeated the Double Headed Dragon. No... Or he might have lost his memory as the “Bow”.”

“By the way, weren’t you able to bring the “Bow” along?”

When Vodyanoy asked, Baba Yaga snorted in displeasure.

“I tried to do so, but the “Whip” got in the way... He has dropped it somewhere.”

"That's a shame."

Vodyanoy muttered in a tone as if he didn't think so at all. He threw a new gold coin which he took out to the air. The young man himself looked upward and greatly opened his mouth. The gold coin depicted a parabola and was going to jump inside Vodyanoy's mouth.

Exactly just before he was about to swallow the gold coin, Vodyanoy opened his eyes wide. He quickly grasped the gold coin which fell with his right hand.

"Could you stop teasing me? Geez, I can't be too careful."

Spitting out such words as he was annoyed, Vodyanoy opened his right hand. What was there was not the gold coin, but an old copper coin. Baba Yaga switched the coins in an instant. The old woman demon unnaturally diverted her look and carefully stroked the tip of her broom.

Not seeming at all interested in the two's exchanges, Drekavac asked.

"What do you intend to do from now on, Baba Yaga?"

Stopping her hand touching the broom, Baba Yaga answered.

"First, I'll heal my wounds. Then, I'll kill the "Whip". I'll get involved with the "Bow" afterwards. I said it earlier, but there is something strange about the "Bow". I want to observe the situation for a while."

"So you'll kill the master of the Thunder Swirl. I thought that you'll enjoy it a little more."

Vodyanoy overlooked Baba Yaga with a surprised face.

"I intended to, but in case the "Bow" is near... Though I say kill, it'll be after watching the situation for several days."

Baba Yaga lightly tapped her broom. The tip of the broom which looked like a bunch of straw, which was stamped on, until just a while ago returned to its original shape.

As she contentedly nodded, the old woman demon looked back to the youth and the old man.

"Drekavac, Vodyanoy. What will you guys do?"

"If I find the "Bow", I'll assist you. After all, always having a Vanadis as an opponent is troublesome."

Seeming to be out of gold coins, Vodyanoy answered while turning upside down the leather bag. Drekavac closed his eyes again.

"There is something I'm looking for. I can't move now. I'll leave it to you two."

"Is it all right? You and I subtly harbored different thoughts regarding the "Bow"."

In a tone as to make sure, Baba Yaga looked at Drekavac. His eyes still closed as such, the old man calmly replied.

"My thoughts hasn't changed from the old days, Baba Yaga. Thus, you don't need to be concerned."

"Understood. Then, see you again."

Baba Yaga swung her broom once. Air flowed within the darkness and the hems of Drekavac's robe faintly rustled.

Then, before that air stopped moving, the old woman demon's figure had disappeared.



Speaking of the Zhcted Nobles who hated Elizavetta Fomina, there was probably no one who hated her more than Orgelt Kazakov governing the land of Polus.

Though Ellen who held the nickname of "Wind Princess of the Silver Flash" was also hostile to Elizavetta due to various circumstances, there was no doubt that even her hostility was less than Kazakov's.

Kazakov who had the title of Earl was 35 years old. His brown hair was short and he grew a rich beard from the cheeks to the chin. He had a large build, wide shoulders and a stout body. There was an intrepid force coupled with sharp piercing eyes.

Actually, he was a man who won fame as a warrior until he inherited his peerage and territory. The weapon which he was using was neither a sword nor a spear, but a mace. When Kazakov powerfully wielded the mace with his stout arm, the enemy's armors were squashed, flesh was gouged and bones were smashed.

He, who always stood at the vanguard and wielded his mace on the battlefield, was called "Bloody Kazakov" and was feared.

There were many reasons why Kazakov hated Elizavetta, but the greatest one was her eyes of different colors. He held strong unpleasant feelings to the Rainbow Eyes. You might say that it was a superstitious fear and a physiological feeling of evasion.

When Kazakov once inspected his territory, he had happened to come across a girl with Rainbow Eyes in a certain village.

"An evil spirit applied a curse. Otherwise, there's no way that a human would be born with such uncanny (ominous) eyes."

The giant Earl Polus was about to cut down the girl on the spot as soon as he declared so. His attendant who was beside him stopped him using eager words and Kazakov stored his sword in the sheath with a reluctant attitude, but it was over with that.

"I won't kill her. But, I will sell off the girl along with her family as slaves."

He seemed to be not satisfied with just banishing her from his territory. The attendant could not do any more than it, and it was all the more a small village.

This incident caused quite the ruckus, but King Victor said nothing.

For a noble, the right of self-government was permitted in his/her territory. All which was in the territory belonged to the noble ruling there. Unless it was an act which caused harm to the Kingdom, the royal families could not intervene in their rule.

However, it was said that King Victor secretly took in that family before they went out of Zhcted and made them live in a certain noble's territory. Since King Victor said nothing about this, it was not certain whether this was true or not.

Anyway, there were people who frowned in disapproval about this action of Kazakov, but those who showed approval were not few, either. Elizavetta's father, Rodion Abt who was Kazakov's friend was one of them.

When Rodion committed a crime later on, and attempted to escape and was killed by Ellen, Kazakov hated Elizavetta more than the silver-haired Vanadis.

"Rodion committed a crime, so he probably gets his just deserts by receiving retribution. But, isn't it his daughter of Rainbow Eyes who made him commit a crime?"

As expected, there was no one who approved these words, but Earl Polus believed his own thoughts.

For Kazakov with such a temperament, the existence of Elizavetta who was the Vanadis of Rainbow Eyes was an exasperating thing. Then, Kazakov did not like the fact that Polus which he governed and Lebus were adjoined.

"I had never felt like this at the time of the previous Vanadis though."

Moreover recently, there was something which made Kazakov furious.

Although Duke Bydgauche Ilda Krutis moved his soldiers, he was blocked by Ellen and Elizavetta.

He was a noble who had a territory in the northern part of Zhcted, and you might say that there was no one who was not on friendly terms with Ilda. Of course, Kazakov had also piled up interactions with him, but his mental state regarding Ilda was somewhat complex.

Kazakov was 35 years old. Ilda was 34 years old. They were of the same generation. Partly because each other's territories were close, Kazakov could not help being conscious of (concerned with) Ilda since a long time ago.

However, there was a clear difference between the two of them.

Ilda was a Duke and governed the very large land of Bydgauche. Kazakov was an Earl and the size of Polus which he governed was also less than half of Bydgauche's. Though even Polus belonged to the rich category in the northern part of Zhcted, as expected it was nothing compared to Bydgauche.

In addition, Ilda had the rights of succession to the throne. Of course, Kazakov did not have it.

This was something which could not be overturned. Therefore, Kazakov came to think that he must surpass Ilda in other fields. The reason why he came to use a mace was also because he was no match at all for Ilda with either the sword or the spear.

On the battlefield, Kazakov built many distinguished military services. To the extent of being give a dangerous nickname.

But, Ilda also did not yield to others regarding military exploits. Even more than the skillfulness of the military arts of the person in question, his soldiers had a deep trust in him and he excelled in command capability. It was always Ilda that people admired.

Of course, Kazakov also admired Ilda, but there was always a bitter feeling deep inside him.

Because he was holding such a feeling, Kazakov could not help being irritated to the story about the fact that Ilda was defeated by Elizavetta.

“According to what I heard, didn’t Lord Ilda raise an army because his attendant was poisoned? Why stop him from attacking such a cowardly fellow [4]? That filthy girl of Rainbow Eyes.”

At these last lines, Kazakov’s feelings intensified. It was to the extent that he seriously thought to gather soldiers and invaded Lebus.

As mentioned above, Polus ruled by Kazakov and Lebus were adjoined. It was not that difficult to make soldiers advance. Moreover, Ilda who would probably act as mediator in such a case could not move from the Capital Silesia as he was accused of crimes.

Besides Ilda, if one were to speak of a person powerful enough to act as mediator among the neighboring noble feudal lords, it would be either the Vanadis of Legnica or the Vanadis of Osterode. However, since Legnica lost Alexandra Alshavin, the state of Vanadis absence continued.

The Vanadis governing Osterode was Valentina Glinka Estes with the nickname of “Illusory Princess of the Hollow Shadow”, but she had a weak constitution and it was hard to think that she could assertively act as mediator. Besides, there was the distance, too. He only had to end it before she intervened.

However, thinking so far, Kazakov hesitated.

As the feudal lord of Polus, as expected he could not move the soldiers just because he hated the other party. What’s more, the other party was one of the only seven Vanadis of Zhcted. Moreover, he also knew that the Rainbow Eyes were accepted in Lebus.

From such circumstances, as his one-sided anger grew stronger towards Elizavetta, Kazakov went through this winter.

It was at such time that a man had visited Kazakov.

“—Meyer Tyurina?”

Hearing the name of the sudden visitor, Kazakov frowned. It was a name which he has never heard. The servant who informed his master of the guest’s visit presented a letter to Kazakov.

“It is from that Lord Meyer. He said that he was entrusted with it by His Excellency Duke Bydgauche.”

Although feeling doubtful, Kazakov received the letter and checked the seal. It was certainly the Duke Bydgauche House’s. Tearing off the seal with careful hands, Kazakov looked over the letter inside.

"It is certainly His Highness the Duke's handwriting."

If it was Ilda Krutis who introduced him (Meyer), then he had to meet him. As he told the servant to lead the guest to the drawing room, Kazakov straightened his clothes and also headed to the drawing room.

It was a short man.

Judging from his countenance, he seemed to be about 40, and his physique was about the same as a 14 or 15-year-old boy. His hands and feet extended from aristocrat-like gorgeous clothes and his head splendidly grew bald. His eyelids were unduly large and his eyes were thin to the extent that one did know whether they were opened.

While overlooking the guest, Kazakov thought that he was a man who gave a creepy feeling.

"I am Meyer Tyurina. I am honored to be able to meet you, Kazakov-sama."

The man who named himself Meyer courteously bowed his head. Kazakov generously nodded.

A blazing flame was lighted in the fireplace of the drawing room which warmed the interior of the room.

On a small table of marble, two silver cups filled with wine were placed.

"Though it may be rude of me, today is the first time that I got to know about you. Even in the letter of introduction of His Excellency Duke Bydgauche, there were detailed things written about you. By what kind of connection did you become acquainted with His Excellency the Duke?"

It was a direct way of speaking which seemed like Kazakov. Meyer, showing no signs of being offended, twisted his lips. Seemingly, he intended to reveal a self-derisive smile.

"It is understandable that Kazakov-sama doesn't know. If this House traced (followed) its lineage, one will see that I am a distant relative of His Excellency Duke Bydgauche; but I am an aristocrat in name only who has neither peerage nor territory, and who has never gotten a honorable government post in the royal palace."

"Hmm. So, what kind of business do you have with me?"

Kazakov frowned. It did not look like he wanted an employment. If it was for such a purpose, Ilda should have written that in the letter of introduction. Kazakov had no idea at all of what Meyer would speak about.

"I would like to confirm something first, but..."

Meyer leaned forward and looked up at Kazakov with upturned eyes.

"In His Excellency the Duke's letter of introduction, was there not written even a single word about what I want, or what kind of talk I intend to approach you with?"

It was a strange question. When Kazakov shook his head left and right, Meyer sighed as if relieved. As if revealing something important, he lowered his voice and said.

"I would like you to raise soldiers. If possible, about 2000."

"Hou."

Kazakov could only say that on the spur of the moment.

"I have not heard about talk of battle in the neighborhood. What do you intend to make me do?"

"I would like you to save a certain man."

As Meyer solemnly said, he took his gaze off from Kazakov and gazed at the fire of the fireplace.

"Do you know a person of Brune called Tigrevurmud Vorn?"

"I have heard about him. He is a Guest General of LeitMeritz, right?"

A young hero who saved the Princess from the hands of the evil insurgents and brought Brune's civil war to an end. Kazakov had heard so. Meyer nodded.

"He is currently caught in Lebus."

When summarizing the contents of what Meyer has said, it is as followed.

Tigrevurmud Vorn received a secret order from King Victor and proceeded to the Asvarre Kingdom across the sea. It was about at the end of summer.

It was said that Tigre accomplished his secret mission and safely returned to the country, but he was captured by Elizavetta who thought of being able to use him politically, and was taken to Lebus.

"The Vanadis of Lebus has an ambition. She wants to strengthen her influence in this part of the northern region. Fortunately for her, the Vanadis of Osterode has a weak constitution, so she doesn't stand out; and a new Vanadis has not yet appeared in Legnica. She probably thought that now was her chance."

Kazakov noosed his mouth and remained silent. As he interpreted it as he was urged, Meyer continued his words.

"The other day, the Vanadis of Lebus defeated His Excellency Duke Bydgauche's troops, right? It was also so at that time. Of course, the Vanadis moved after receiving a royal order, but she was proactive as if she had been waiting eagerly for it. She did not even try to persuade His Excellency the Duke."

Meyer calmly stated a falsehood. Elizavetta tried to persuade Ilda, and precisely because it was rejected, she decided to fight. However, Kazakov did not know that.

Though Kazakov was silent, his face turned red tinged with anger. As if he did not notice that change, Meyer said without changing his attitude.

"Let's go back to the story. Those knowing that Tigrevurmud Vorn was caught by Lebus are very few. If it is made published, the relations between Brune and our country will extremely worsen. After all, we plunged their hero into a predicament. Therefore, His Majesty Victor wants to solve this matter in secrecy."

"His Majesty...?"

Kazakov finally uttered his voice. Meyer nodded in a somewhat pretentious gesture.

"My having been sent here is for that purpose. Even if someone like me asks Kazakov-sama, anyone will think that it is not such a serious matter. It is at best a golden opportunity, isn't it?"

Kazakov thought that that was persuasive. This was because none other than Kazakov thought like that about Meyer's visit.

"His Excellency the Duke also deeply trusts Kazakov-sama. He said that if he were to rely on someone when he could not move due to some circumstances, it would be none other than Kazakov-sama, the Earl of Polus."

Those were words which warmed one's heart. But, Kazakov made a wary face as he doubted these words.

It was too much off the wall. He wanted a little more trustworthy information.

"But, is the fact that that Lord Vorn is captured certain? It is not easy task to move 2000 soldiers. Moreover, if our deployment was a mistake, it won't be a funny story."

"Rather than just believing my words, would it not be better if you investigate?"

Meyer answered so and continued.

"Whether or not there is a person newly employed in the Imperial Palace of Lebus recently. And if so, whether or not that person's feature matches with Tigrevurmud Vorn's."

"Employed?"

"The Vanadis of Lebus has done so in order to convince those around. Of course, so that they don't let Earl Vorn escape."

Then after a short pause, Meyer slowly said.

"If we succeed in rescuing Earl Vorn, Kazakov-sama will certainly become the leading person in this part of the northern region. After all, circumstances aside, His Excellency Duke Bydgauche has left a stain by having raised soldiers."

Meyer's words accurately stimulated Kazakov's pride. The words that he would surpass Ilda and became an existence holding great influence in this northern part of Zhcted were something strong for Kazakov. There was no doubt that such an opportunity would never come again if he missed it just once.

But still, Kazakov hesitated. He could not decide immediately.

When he was about to say “let me think about it”, Meyer opened his mouth a moment earlier than that.

“If Kazakov-sama cannot move no matter what, then it can’t be helped. I shall ask another person. However, both His Majesty and His Excellency the Duke will surely be disappointed. They said that if it is the “Bloody Kazakov”, he will probably stand against that Vanadis without fear.”

At Meyer’s words, Kazakov’s eyebrows jumped up. Those were words he could not ignore.

“I will be troubled if you misunderstand, but I’m not afraid of Vanadis. Understood. I shall investigate at once whether or not Lord Vorn is in Lebus. As soon as I know that, I will march into Lebus leading 2000 soldiers.”

At that time, Kazakov did not notice that Meyer revealed a crooked smile just for an instant. Meyer respectfully bowed his head.

“When push comes to shove, you are allowed to kill the Vanadis. I was asked to tell you so. I need not speak about a Vanadis’ strength at this late hour, but please take care. Moreover, who knows what kind of calamity those Rainbow Eyes could bring.”

Meyer deliberately emphasized the word “Rainbow Eyes”. As if stirring up Kazakov’s negative feelings.

Meyer who left Kazakov’s mansion heaved a small sigh. He chimed as if saying he finished his task.

“He is a petty person. Thenardier, Faron and Badouin were more worth playing with.”

Meyer Tyurina was a false name. Even the letter of Lord Bydgauche was a counterfeit.

The man’s real name was Ganelon. Maximilian Bennusa Ganelon.

Until a few days ago, Ganelon was in Osterode. It became troublesome in the Vanadis Valentina’s mansion, and he left Osterode and came until here for a certain purpose.

“At this rate, Kazakov will move. After settling this matter, shall I return to Brune? Greast also seems to be doing various things after all.”

Looking up at the gray sky, Ganelon talked to himself. Marquis Greast was a man who could be said to be Ganelon’s trusted retainer. When Ganelon hid his figure in the civil war last year, he also let him tag along. Currently, Greast should be secretly maneuvering in the southern part of Brune.

“But, That Vanadis of Osterode is more troublesome than I thought.”

While walking, Ganelon spoke to himself.

“Should I have killed her instead?”

However, Ganelon shook his head once and abandoned the idea. Although he was not attracted to her as the opposite sex, the attitude of Valentina trying to raise a rebellion for her ambition was to his liking.

He did not intend to act together with her. Moreover, he also planned to crush her mercilessly if she were to stand in his way as an enemy. But, Ganelon evaluated her enough to think that it was all right as it is for a while.

“The debt of having allowed me to stay at your mansion for about one year, let’s say that I returned it with this matter...”

While muttering a selfish thing, Ganelon walked down the street leading to the castle town.

Chapter 2 – Urz

Urz and Damad stood stock still at a cliff with dumbfounded faces. With faces bearing a headache, the two men gazed out at the opposite shore 30 Alsins (about 30 meters) ahead.

At the steep cliff of the opposite shore, a suspension bridge which was broken here and there loosely hung down.

About a half koku has passed since they departed at daybreak. Urz and Damad were just about to go through the forest.

The two of them carefully leaned forward and looked down at their feet. A suspension bridge similarly hung down also at the steep cliff of this side. It looked like the rope had been cut in the middle.

A frozen river lay quietly under the cliff.

“We have no choice but to take a detour.”

Damad said in a troubled tone, and Urz cocked his head in puzzlement. By the way, Urz had hung a sword to his waist and he carried something which tied branches in a bundle on his shoulder. He put the branches around the bonfire all night long; letting them dry so that they became easy to burn. He was told by Damad to at least carry this.

“But, it isn’t that great a height. The river seemed to be frozen, so couldn’t we reach the opposite bank if we go down the cliff and walked on the river?”

The cliff’s height was about five or six Alsins by eye measurement. Though vertical, there were many places where they could apply their hands and feet as the surface was rugged.

However, Damad revealed a face which seemed to disagree and shook his head.

“Where is the guarantee that we can safely cross just because it’s frozen? What if the ice broke on the way and we fell into the cold water. We’d die.”

“Then, let’s try.”

As Urz surveyed the surroundings and found a stone as big as the head of an adult, he carried it with both hands. He walked to the edge of the cliff and threw it at the river below.

The stone which fell let a hard sound resound, and rolled as it slid on the surface of the frozen river. Urz looked back at Damad with a smile.

“Look, it seems to be all right.”

“No, with what you threw now, a crack could’ve possibly run to a place where we can’t see.”

Urz looked at Damad who stubbornly refused with an amazed face. After thinking “by any chance”, he asked with a nasty smile

“Are you by any chance scared?”

“As if I’m scared!”

The Muozinel young man flew into a rage and immediately retorted. But, he pulled himself together at once and coughed once. He said as to persuade.

“In my country, there is such a saying. “The one who walks on ice is a fool”.”

“You’re quite frank.”

“Every year, when winter comes, there would always be a stupid brat who’s going to run on a frozen river, break the ice and fall in. To the extent that the middle-aged men bet on who will do it first this year. Let’s go.”

While beginning to walk along the cliff, Damad continued the talk. Urz had no choice but to follow after him, and listened to him talk.

Muozinel’s winter was short, and it might be said that it was not cold compared with the neighboring countries. Of course, there were days where snow fell and also days where cold wind fiercely blew. But, such days were really few. It was totally different from Zheted which was surrounded by snow during winter.

Even if ice formed on rivers and lakes, it was said that at most it was thinner than paper. For Damad who had lived in such an environment, walking across ice was a thought hard to understand.

“Aren’t you scared after all?”

“Just say that I’m cautious.”

As Damad retorted, Urz did not tease him any further, too.

Even if they were to safely walk on the ice, they would be sandwiched between the cliffs in the meanwhile. If bandits were to appear like yesterday, there would be no way to escape. Taking that into consideration, Damad’s cautious stance was right. Even if they made a detour, they shouldn’t have to run a risk recklessly.

In addition, Urz had not perfectly recovered yet. He felt languid as usual, and when applying his hand on his forehead, he felt he had a fever. It was wise not to strain himself.

“How long is it likely to take until the castle town?”

Being asked, Damad took out a map from his load bag.

“If we go north along the river like this, there is a place where we can cross to the opposite bank. When we crossed to the opposite bank, we will go south along the river again... It’s on tomorrow daytime that we will arrive at the castle town, I guess.”

“I caused master to worry, eh...”

"It can't be helped, right? After all, we can't fly in the sky like a hawk. What, even that master of yours will shed tears and be glad if she meets you alive. So, be careful not to catch a strange disease. I don't want to be embroiled in it."

Unlike yesterday, today's sky cleared up. The air was also not that much cold and there was no signs of beasts, either. While walking along the cliff, the two men had a silly talk to kill time. But since Urz had not that much to talk about, Damad mostly talked.

"What surprises me most after coming to Zhcted is this cold after all. I thought that if a human feels inclined to live here, he would be able to live anywhere."

"Is Muozinel that warm? It also snow there, right?"

"On level ground, there is almost no snow remaining for more than a day. Although there are places like mountains where snow doesn't melt all year round, there are generally the royalty and titled nobility's summer resorts or rough spots where even hunters don't enter."

For Damad who had almost travelled alone so far, it seems to be a fresh feeling to have a trip companion although only for a short time. Even though it was an opponent whom he fought yesterday, this Muozinel young man was frankly talking as if such a thing did not happen.

As for Urz; although such a thing happened yesterday, he didn't want to build an awkward atmosphere by ignoring Damad. Even more so, now that there was at a distance of one day to the castle town.

In that case, perhaps because there was not that much a difference in age, the talk got unexpectedly lively.

"You know, I'm the fourth son of a poor peasant."

"Fourth son?"

To Urz who opened his eyes wide, Damad laughing said.

"You know, it's quite usual that poor people have many children. We had a field of barley, but the eldest brother is to inherit it. There was nothing that the second and third big brothers could get. At most, they get a tiny share of the profits by helping with the eldest brother's work."

"Is that why you became a soldier?"

There are few methods for the sons of a peasant, except the eldest son, to make a living.

It was either eking out a living by hunting or fishing and the like while helping with their big brother's work, or getting permission from the village mayor and clearing a field by himself or also becoming a soldier or mercenary.

Naturally, there was no expectation to have a bride, too. For a person doubtful of whether he could even feed himself, the people who were married were only the object of great curiosity.

Therefore, the second or third son of a peasant that dreamed of making a fortune with a stroke of luck became soldiers.

Although most were placed in the front on their first campaign and were crushed, there were also those among them who stubbornly survived, and continued fighting after that and achieved distinguished services. Damad was one of such people.

"My dream is to live in a mansion built and decorated with gold and jewelry, have so many beautiful women that you can't finish counting them even if you use both hands served me and live by leaving everything to a clever slave."

"Slave?"

After asking back reflexively, Urz remembered. There was slavery in the Muozinel Kingdom. Damad responded as if talking about a common thing.

"Although slave is one word, there are various though. If there are slaves to whom you entrust with heavy labor, there are also clever slaves who act as teachers. Also slaves that cook meals and slaves that takes care of the garden. It seems that when you become a great person, you will also own slaves who go about changing your clothes."

"I can't even imagine it..."

Urz wondered whether it would not be troublesome to especially borrow someone else's hands to change one's own clothes. But, it was probably because Urz was not a Muozinel person that he thought that.

Urz likewise talked about himself. About the fact that he was saved by a girl of a fishing village near the place where he was lying down on the shore. Then, his encounter with Elizavetta.

Leaving aside the matter of Rainbow Eyes^[1] and the Imperial Palace, when he only talked about the fact that he came to work in the Imperial Palace after his bow skill was highly evaluated, Damad brightened his black pupils as he took interest to that.

"Could you show me that bow skill of yours just once?"

Saying so, the Muozinel young man held out the bow and an arrow which he was holding.

"I was just thinking that we will hunt once around here. After all, we will arrive at the Imperial Palace tomorrow at the earliest."

"Is there not much food and water?"

While receiving the bow and arrow, the darkish red-haired youth asked.

Since Urz who fell into the forest naturally had neither food nor water, he received some from Damad's share. If Damad didn't have more than enough food and water as was common for cautious travelers, he might not have talked about taking Urz along until the castle town.

"There is still a day's share. That's why we should procure water and meat while we can."

Damad shrugged his shoulders and turned his sight at the frozen river under the cliff.

“About water, we should light a fire and melt ice and snow. What is necessary is meat.”

“I’m convalescent, you know?”

Though Urz said so, half of it was intended as a joke. Regarding meals, he was completely indebted to Damad for the moment. He needed to return the debt.

“I won’t say “Do it until you get a prey”. You have a half koku. If you fail, I’ll do it.”

“Understood. Let’s do that then.”

And then, Urz shot down one quail and one hare.



It was after the outside became bright enough that Mashas Rodant and company came out of the rotted shrine where they spent a night. The snow which flickered during night also stopped and the sun was shining in the sky.

Though the sunlight was weak and seemed to be somewhat unreliable, Mashas felt quite at ease with just the fact that it was sunny. The castle town where they headed for was very near. They would probably arrive in the afternoon.

“I didn’t think that the talk^[2] was over only in LeitMeritz, but from there passing through Regnitz and Lebus, huh... We came quite far, eh.”

Looking at the plain where trees sparsely soared, Mashas talked to himself.

He was currently 56 years old. He wrapped his stocky body in a dark brown overcoat and put on a hat with a feather. He wore a sword on his waist. Although the overcoat was backed with fur and his movement became slightly dull, he was all right even in the cold where one’s breathe was white and grew hazy.

Mashas was an Earl ruling Aude located in the north of the Brune Kingdom. He was at an age where it wouldn’t be strange for him to hand over the title and territory to his son and retired any time now, but it looked like for that to happen there was still ways to go.

Being asked by Princess Regin and Prime Minister Badouin, he now had the duty as the Princess’s advisor.

Hearing that Tigre who should be sojourning in the Zhcted Kingdom as a guest General had fell into the sea and went missing, Mashas visited Zhcted to confirm the truth. And he heard the story in detail from the Vanadis Eleonora Viltaria of LeitMeritz.

At the end of summer, Tigre proceeded to Asvarre as a messenger. Not as a messenger of Brune, but of Zhcted.

Although Tigre fulfilled his duty as messenger, the return ship was attacked by a sea dragon and he fell into the sea.

The story did not end there.

Afterwards, the silver-haired Vanadis saw Tigre in a completely different place.

Tigre was serving the Vanadis Elizavetta Fomina of Lebus. He lost his memory and called himself Urz.

Urz was Tigre's father's name. In order to make sure of whether the person who served Elizavetta was really Tigre, Mashas was heading to the Imperial Palace of Lebus.

He was not travelling alone. There were two companions with him.

"Lord Mashas, preparations are over."

Being called out from behind by one of them, Mashas turned his head. A girl with dull golden hair and blue pupils harking back to the bottom of a deep lake stood there. Just like Mashas, she wore an overcoat backed with fur and hung a sword on her waist. She was around 20.

Though her expression could hardly be called amiable, it was not as if she didn't trust Mashas. She was basically like this towards anyone.

Her name was Limalisha. She was called with her nickname Lim by those close to her. She was Ellen's adjutant and also her most trusted close friend.

There were three horses behind Lim. Titta was straddling one of them. She was a girl serving as Tigre's maid.

She wore a dark brown overcoat, a hat and a scarf. Her white gloves made with rabbit's fur got slightly dirty. Due to her small-sized body and her childish face, she looked like a 14 or 15-year-old girl, but she was 16.

When Titta looked at Mashas, she smiled to his face which had turned pale. Mashas also returned a smile while stroking his beard which became stiff by the long trip.

Yesterday, when they were resting in this shrine which was naturally an abandoned building, Titta fell. Both Mashas and Lim thought that she accumulated fatigue by the long trip which she was not used to.

"Titta, we will arrive at the castle town in the afternoon. Bear with it a little more."

When Mashas said that as to cheer her up, Titta nodded saying "yes" as she shook her chestnut hair.

It was a little after noon that Mashas and company set foot in the castle town of Lebus. While pulling the three horses tied at length, they walked along the end of the main street.

"I thought that it will be a little warmer if the sun rises, but it's unexpectedly not so."

"Is that so? I think that it's quite warm though."

To Mashas who complained as he looked up at the sky, Lim inclined her head to the side and responded.

"Hmm. The sensation of cold might be a little different between me, a person of Brune and Limalisha-dono, a person of Zhcted."

"There is also the difference in age and sex."

The two people's impressions aside, it seemed to be the usual weather for the residents of the castle town of Lebus. Children who wrapped their bodies in overcoats and hats happily ran around the street, lovers walked while snuggling up and housewives amused themselves in pleasant chats near stalls.

In the street where stalls stood in a row, merchants were raising vigorous voices.

"As expected of the castle town. It's lively."

Titta smile broadly. Her feelings had probably settled down a little by having entered the castle town. Fatigue could be seen on her face, but a bright shine returned to her hazel-colored eyes. Mashas and Lim felt relieved about that.

"It is as Titta says."

Until they had arrived at this castle town after leaving LeitMeritz, they went along many towns and villages, but they had never seen a place filled with this much liveliness.

The main street was paved in stone pavements and carriages which piled various loads were coming and going. Minstrels sang a farce at the crossroads and clowns were bantering with pedestrians. Food, dolls made by shaving trees and glassworks were sold in stalls.

Even Lim seemed to be captivated by this hustle and bustle. Although it was the same Zhcted, it was after all different from LeitMeritz where she had spent her daily life.

Far away, a huge palace which piled up grayish stones could be seen. That was probably the Imperial Palace.

Each window was large and dark brown ornaments were applied around them. It was also the same for the steep roofs with a slant. Although attaching importance to the solidity which could bear snowstorms, it had not lost its coloring. It was an appearance which gave such an impression.

—Is Lord Tigrevurmud inside that...?

As Lim shook her head and pulled herself together, she suggested to her two companions.

"Let's first look for an inn. After all, it is not a problem which will be solved today or tomorrow."

"You're right. It won't also do well if we don't let these guys rest."

While looking back at the horses he was pulling, Mashas responded. Both of them could not voice it out, but they were also concerned about Titta.

"It's likely to take some time if we are to look for an inn which can keep three horses."

"Hmm. I'm sorry, but Limalisha-dono, can you look after them for a little while?"

As if he found something he was concerned with, Mashas entrusted the horses to Lim and walked to a stall.

It was a store which sold drink which poured hot water boiled to fill a cauldron in a bisque cup and melted jam and grape honey. Getting a simple furnace ready and keeping the fire burning, the hot water was prevented from getting cold.

As Mashas bought three cups of that drink, he held two cups with both hands, supported the other with his arm and returned to where Lim and Titta were.

"For the time being, let's warm our bodies with this."

The two girls respectively expressed their gratitude and received a cup, where steam rose, from the old Earl. When drinking a mouthful while being careful so as to not burn themselves, the smell of jam and honey tickled the nose and a faint sweetness remained in the mouth. Heat gradually spread inside the body.

While applying his mouth to the cup, Mashas said in an indifferent tone.

"There seems to be a big inn three houses away from here where we can keep the horses. They say that we should look sequentially from here."

Lim looked at the old Earl with a blank face.

"Where did you hear such a story?"

While sipping the drink of the cup, Mashas pointed at the stall where he bought it with a finger. Lim alternately stared at the old Earl and the stall with a surprised face.

It looked like he immediately came back after buying the drinks without particularly even showing signs of having a chat, but Mashas seemed to have asked the necessary things within a short exchange.

Titta gave a small yawn, she probably felt relaxed after having warmed her body. Mashas patted Titta's head.

"If you've become sleepy, you should say it without reserve. I'll carry you on my back."

"I-I'm all right, Mashas-sama. I can properly walk by myself."

Though Titta answered with her face which turned red, she yawned again soon after she finished speaking. Seeing the chestnut-haired girl hanging her head in shame, Mashas and Lim smiled.

And then, they immediately found the inn. Fortunately, they were also two vacant rooms, and Mashas and company decided to stay there. One room was used by Mashas and the other by Lim and Titta. The trio gathered in Mashas' room when they had a talk.

Titta and Lim's room was not so wide and the lamp hanging from the ceiling was also slightly dirty. There was only a small window. The curtain was also just of a size enough to cover the window and the edge got kinked. There was neither a table nor chair.

But, there were two beds, the wall was thick and three pieces of thick blankets had been prepared for each bed.

"Like this, we don't have to sleep wearing thick clothes against the cold, eh."

Titta checked the condition of the blankets and revealed a smile of relief.

Although a thick overcoat protected the body from the cold, it was heavy after all. Lim and Mashas who were used to the weight of armor would be all right, but it looked like it was simply tough for Titta.

Besides, by wearing thick clothes against the cold for many days as such, the head and neck would become itchy. In the case of Lim and Titta, they were just going to be worried about the condition of their hair.

Lim put the loads near the bed and turned to Titta.

"You are tired from the long trip, aren't you Titta? Please rest."

"But, you will talk with Mashas-sama after this, right? I, too--"

Hiding fatigue inside her hazel-colored pupils, Titta showed a stouthearted attitude. However, when Lim shook her head, she softly told her with an attitude like a big sister admonishing her little sister.

"I understand your feelings. We have finally come so far after all. But, that's precisely why you must not overdo it. Properly resting and relieving fatigue is your work now."

Not giving up, Titta tightly clenched her small hands and gazed at Lim as to entreat her. Lim had no choice but to take out her trump card.

"You do not want to worry Lord Tigrevurmud when you meet him, don't you?"

The effect was immediate. Titta answered "yes" in a voice which seems to vanish, took off her thick clothes that were for the cold and untied her hair. She then crawled into the bed.

Lim got down on a knee near the bed and gently stroked the girl's chestnut hair.

"I will look after you until you sleep. Lord Mashas will at least wait for that."

As Titta thanked her in a small voice with a smile, she quietly closed her eyes. She began to leak quiet sleeper's breathing before long.

—As expected, she seemed to be considerably tired.

Lim quietly stood up so as to not wake Titta. She was careful so as to not make a sound and came out of the room.

When she visited Mashas' room, the old Earl with a gray beard was sitting on the bed as he wrapped his stocky body in the threefold blanket after having thrown off his thick clothes that was for the cold.



"There you are. For the time being, why don't you sit there? The floor is cold after all."

Mashas said with a quite composed attitude, and Lim was troubled on how to react. His figure in where he was wrapped from head to toe looked like that of a fairy with a round body coming out of a fairy tale. Since she could naturally not say such a thing, Lim somehow built a laudable face. She sat down on the edge of the bed.

"As I had said before, I would like to collect information on Lord Tigrevurmud, no, the one called Urz before heading to the Imperial Palace."

In fact, there was also the possibility that the man named Urz was not Tigre. It was for self-admonition that Lim expressly corrected herself. Mashas nodded as he agreed.

"It's good to collect information, but what would you do specifically?"

"I will look around for someone working in the Imperial Palace and ask about it, pretending to be a traveler."

There were civil officials and knights who finished their jobs on that day and set out together with companions to a bar, maids and court ladies who went out shopping to the castle town and also those who gave a suitable reason and strolled in the castle town for relaxation.

Waiting near the Imperial Palace for such a person to come out, accosting him in a suitable place and finding out about Urz. That was Lim's idea.

While explaining, Lim could not repress the uneasiness welling up within her. As if reading it from the slight change of her expression, the old Earl waited that the golden-haired girl had finished her words and slowly opened his mouth.

"Limalisha-dono, aren't you more tired than you think?"

"...Do I look like it?"

The usual serene calm was lost from Lim's voice. Though Mashas nodded with a warm smile, since his whole body was covered with a blanket, it was seriously lacking in dignity. Lim once again gazed at Mashas' figure and laughed, but it was a somewhat unhealthy smile.

"It is as Lord Mashas said, I might be tired. Somehow, I don't seem to come up with good ideas..."

Until yesterday, just thinking about arriving at the castle town was enough. However, when they entered the castle town like this, she had become anxious about the upcoming events.

If he was not Tigre, what would she do? Moreover, supposing that it was unmistakably Tigre, if he were to say that he doesn't remember anything, would she be able to keep her cool?

She had heard that he had lost his memory, but was it something that they could manage by themselves? If Elizavetta got to know of their existence, wouldn't she do something?

She thought that it was not good like this. Ellen trusted her and left it to her, so she must meet her expectations by any means.

Even if she thought so, Lim was not able to shake off her dark imagination.

Seeing Lim depressed, Mashas rubbed his hands together inside of the blanket. And smiled.

"Then, let's rest already for today, and think about how to deal with it in preparation for what may happen."

"How to deal with it?"

To Lim who showed confusion in her blue pupils, the old Earl nodded.

"Let's suppose that the one called Urz isn't Tigre. In that case, how will Limalisha-dono explain it to Eleonora-dono? Even thinking about her attitude when she had asked us, she probably won't let it end with us saying 'when we checked, it was different person'."

"Then, um, we must do what we can to persuade her with words..."

While answering at once, Lim was aware that she had spontaneously slurred her words.

Ellen would probably not doubt her report. But, when thinking of how much she would be depressed and how to comfort her, she was greatly troubled. It was again uneasiness different from the one that she harbored in her heart until a while ago.

While gazing as to confirm the change on Lim's expression, Mashas continued his words.

"Regarding Eleonora-dono, I might not be good to persuade her. As long as you're by her side, she will probably recover by herself. However, Eleonora-dono won't be the only one to whom we will have to explain. Along these lines, I'm troubled even now about how I would report it to Her Highness the Princess."

Though Mashas jokingly said with a wry smile, Lim sympathized with him from the bottom of her heart. If she was in his position, she would not be able to make the report to Princess Regin at all. She would have probably given up just on thinking about the words. Mashas put on a serious expression and continued.

"You can't afford not to report. We can't get someone to replace you, either. If you report too late because you think too much about what to say, it will be the worst case. On the other hand, it won't be good to put it with common words, either. Something like that will be immediately seen through, and you will also find yourself deplorable."

--Thank you, Lord Mashas."

Lim bowed her head politely. Certainly, if she continued to think about many things like that, she would be crushed by uneasiness. She was just fine as she was now.

"I will accept your words and rest today. Tomorrow, let's bring Titta and move with the three of us."

"Yes, let's do that. I will also rest. It looks like my body is less able to endure a long trip than expected."

Mashas greatly shook his body covered with the blanket. As Lim chuckled, she stood up from the bed and bowed to the old Earl. She then left the room.

When she returned to her room, Titta's vigorous sleeper's breathing could be heard. When she looked at her, the blanket had slightly slipped off. As she approached the chestnut-haired girl's bed, Lim quietly straightened the blanket. Then, she crawled into her bed.

She fell asleep while thinking about various things.

After about a quarter koku had passed after Lim came out of his room, Mashas threw off the blanket covering his body. He wore his thick overcoat, hung his sword to his waist and left the room.

He went out of the inn and walked around the inn for a while. He needed to know what sort of stores were nearby and how long the street extended without delay. He wanted to check as much stores as possible which were likely to be useful in case something were to happen.

—Was it Elizavetta Fomina? I've yet to grasp her personality.

Mashas thought about whether in the worst case scenario, they would be imprisoned in the Imperial Palace by Elizavetta.

This was because assuming that the man called Urz was Tigre and that Elizavetta tried to keep hiding it to her surroundings, the existence of Mashas and company would be more than dangerous.

Leaving aside the case that Mashas was alone, now he was entrusted with two important girls: Titta and Lim. He had to act carefully also for their safety.

"Next, I must look for a store which serves a delicious meal."

In order to make the two girls who will wake up sometime soon glad.

Under the sun floating in the dim sky, Mashas walked to the street where stalls stood in a line.



The curtain of night which let the stars twinkle in the sky gradually faded. The end of the eastern sky began to turn dim white and calmly informed of the dawn. The sun would soon illuminate the ground.

It was at that time that Elizavetta came out of her bedroom in the depths of Lebus' Imperial Palace. Two days had passed since the day when she returned covered in wounds to the Imperial Palace.

Wearing a dress which piled up purple fabric and used frills and laces abundantly, and hanging the black whip, her Viralt on her right waist, the red-haired Vanadis proudly walked along the corridor.

Though a cloth which applied medicine was pasted on a cheek and her right arm was wound with a bandage, her eyes of different colors were tinged with a dignified brightness and painfulness could not be felt at all. Elizavetta lightly waved her hand to the salute of patrolling soldiers and the soldiers standing on watch.

Since her attitude was too majestic, the soldiers did not think of it as suspicious. Reporting to neither Naum nor Lazarl, they had seen their master with looks of admiration.

It was after a half koku that Naum noticed that Elizavetta had disappeared from the Imperial Palace.

The knight in his prime who hurriedly jumped into the Vanadis' bedroom found a note on the table, and moreover, after receiving the report that one of the horses for the Vanadis had disappeared, he looked up at the sky.

Elizavetta who left the Imperial Palace ran through the highway wrapped in a very dim light on a horse.

She put on a white overcoat over her purple dress and also put on a white hat which was woven with wool. These overcoat and hat were the ones that she wore when she slipped out with Urz and went to the castle town.

Her Viralt was put in a part of the skirt of the dress here it could not be seem; she rolled up the hem and could straddle the horse without riding horizontally. A big cargo bag was tied onto the horse's saddle and there was food, water and a map inside.

She ordered a tight-lipped court lady to prepare these outside the Imperial Palace beforehand.

—To think that the slipping out with Urz would be helpful in such a situation.

The air of when the day had just dawned was chilly, but Elizavetta thought that it was just right to maintain her clear consciousness.

After she had returned to the Imperial Palace two days ago, Elizavetta was in a state where strain was always forced on her. What she feared was that those working in the Imperial Palace would be controlled by Baba Yaga and would attack her. It was really fortunate that nothing happened.

And last night, Elizavetta received a report from Lazarl. The old civil official had investigated about run-down shrines which enshrined Baba Yaga.

—Ten places. Ten places for the time being...

Their locations were written down on the map inside the cargo bag. If it went smoothly, she would be able to visit all of them in nine or ten days.

Elizavetta suddenly removed her left hand from the reins. She touched the black whip roundly bundled and hung on her waist.

"I'm sorry, Valitsaif."

The Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl apologetically cast down her eyes.

“I may be disqualified as a Vanadis.”

As a Vanadis, she should have confined her personal feelings and only mobilized for Lebus.

Elizavetta did not intend to throw away her pride and sense of responsibility as a Vanadis. Besides, she also had the firm conviction that defeating Baba Yaga would unmistakably be of benefit for Lebus.

But, Elizavetta, being aware of that thought, excluded it and went after the demon only for her personal feelings. In order to satisfy the anger and pride blowing violently within her chest, and also in order to release the abominable curse dwelling in her right arm, she was riding her horse now.

“Even though I don’t intend to move as a Vanadis, I’m relying on the Viralt which belongs to a Vanadis. It’s very selfish. Despite that, can you lend me your power, Valitsaif?”

With her left hand, Elizavetta strongly grasped the Thunder Swirl.

“Only that old hag—”

As if responding to her appeal, the tip from the handle of the bundled black whip wore a dim light. It scorched the atmosphere, burst and scattered white sparks. It seemed to encourage her and support her back.

“Thank you.”

Just for an instant, Elizavetta’s expression loosened and a smile appeared. However, she immediately erased it, looked at the front and grasped the reins once again.



When about one koku had passed since Elizavetta slipped out of the Imperial Palace, two young men passed through the gate of the castle town. It was Urz and Damad.

The sky had already become bright. In the main street, merchants opened their stores and were busy with preparation; government officials, craftsmen and soldiers headed to their posts at a quick pace. There were also figures of children heading in groups to a temple in order to learn reading and writing.

Seeing the familiar castle town, Urz heaved a sigh of relief and fatigue.

“I didn’t think that it’ll take more than two days.”

While walking side by side with Urz, Damad snorted in displeasure.

“Even you probably didn’t notice that we’ve taken the wrong way.”

It was planned that the two of them should have arrived at the castle town within yesterday.

But, both Urz and Damad were unfamiliar with the geography of this area. After finding a bridge and crossing to the opposite shore, the two men had advanced to the direction opposite of the road to the castle town. It was after having walked more than two koku that Urz and Damad realized it.

"Anyway, it's quite lively, as expected of a castle town."

To Damad who looked around and revealed an expression of admiration, Urz asked.

"Shall we first go somewhere and eat something? When thinking about it, it might take a considerable time to give you a reward."

"Yes. Certainly, it looks like the formalities will be troublesome when it comes to the Imperial Palace... No, wait. Won't the Imperial Palace prepare a feast for me as the benefactor who helped you and brought you until here?"

"If you get too carried away, I will also firmly report about the fact that you tried to kill me."

As he gave a warning to Damad's impudence, Urz suddenly stopped. He felt a gaze and looked back.

An old man with his stocky body wrapped in an overcoat was standing there. The old man opened his mouth befuddled, and turned a look of surprise to Urz.

Similarly, Urz was also not able to take his eyes off from the old man. The moment when he took a glance at him, the youth felt a vivid nostalgia to the old man's face. As a joy to the extent that his face naturally broke into a smile overflowed from the bottom of his heart, Urz tried to call the old man.

"Ah..."

Soon after, Urz's face became stiff. As if the air had become solid and plugged up his throat, the youth, who only moved his mouth flapping open and close, could not utter his voice. Joy disappeared as it melted, and confusion and irritation eroded Urz's heart.

He did not know the old man's name.

The figure of this old man also appeared inside his memory which was full of many fragments. He knew that the old man was a benefactor who helped him many times and that he was also an important person to him.

And yet, his name did not come out. He could not remember it.

"Um, errr, er..."

With only incoherent words coming out from his mouth, impatience and bitterness blurred on Urz's face. The old man ahead uttered his voice.

"Tigre! Isn't it Tigre!?"

Urz unintentionally shook his shoulders at his shout. To the extent that he took half a step back. As the old man, not noticing such a reaction from the youth, ran with a face mixed with surprise and joy, he strongly hugged Urz.

“What a relief! I’ve heard the story, but you’re really... You’re really alive!”

Urz, unable to return words to the old man, or rather not even knowing what else he should do, looked up at the sky with a perplexed face.

“--Hey, old man.”

Damad who was watching the course of events with a bored face forced his way through there. The young Muozinel man gripped the old man’s arms and forcibly pulled them from Urz.

Urz inwardly heaved a sigh of relief and was grateful to Damad. If Damad was not there, he would have probably stood upright there and be unable to move forever. On the other hand, being boorishly interrupted in an emotional reunion, the old man glared at Damad without concealing his anger.

“What do you want? I’m busy now.”

“That’s my line. What are you doing? When I was wondering why you shouted, now you suddenly jumped on him... Everybody is looking.”

When the old man looked at the surroundings at these words, several people who were walking along the street had stopped and looked their way. If there were housewives who knitted their brows, there were also children who directed wondering looks. They were also those who expected dispute or trouble.

The old man finally regained his calm, coughed once and parted from Urz.

“This isn’t good. Let’s move to another place for the time being.”

“Don’t decide on your own. There is a place where we’re going. For an unknown old man to--”

“Please wait, Damad.”

Interrupting the black-haired Muozinel man’s words, Urz stared straight at the old man.

“There is also something I would like to ask you. Let’s change the place. However--”

Urz hesitated to speak for a moment and bit his lips. However, he immediately pulled himself together and continued.

“My name is Urz.”

Urz, Damad and the old man with the gray hair and beard entered a deserted side road. Seemingly, Urz’s words being too much of a shock, the old man dropped his shoulders and hung his head disappointedly.

The two young men looked at each other. Although they sympathized with him, they also couldn't afford to wait like this for the old man to recover. Urz resolutely accosted him.

"I'm sorry. Could you tell us your name?"

The old man raised his face. He put on an expression as if bearing a headache.

"No, that's right. I have heard that you lost your memory..."

As he shook his gray beard and mumblingly muttered, the old man once again gazed at Urz.

"My name is Mashas Rodant. I'm from Brune and I governed Aude in the north."

"Mashas..."

Urz looked downward with a serious face and repeated that word several times. Mashas stared at the youth with a face filled with expectation.

"H-How is it? Do you seem to be able to remember...?"

Urz did not immediately answer and earnestly explored his memory. He thought that it was a familiar name. However, that name was not connected with the old man's figure which appeared in his fragmentary memory. He even wondered whether there wasn't some kind of mistake, having thought that it sounded familiar.

After a time of a 100 full counts had passed, Urz bowed his head to Mashas.

"Sorry..."

Mashas covered his forehead with his hand and looked up at the sky. When he thought about how he took dozens of days from the far away Brune to arrive at this castle town and finally meet him, he reacted like this.

But, Mashas mustered energy and returned his sight to Urz. When he looked at his face, Urz showed a reaction. He still had a wish.

"I'm sorry, but could you come with me? There are people I want you to meet."

"Hey, could you leave it for after we've gone to the Imperial Palace? This old man's talk is becoming long."

Damad broke in from the side in an annoyed tone. The Muozinel young man openly felt uncomfortable with Mashas. Urz asked Damad.

"Though I feel bad for you, could you hang with me for a little longer?"

Although he could not remember Mashas' name, it was certain that there was this old man's existence within his memory. Urz was positive about that.

“Please, bring us.”

“All right. It’s this way. Those people are staying at the same inn as me.”

Mashas walked at a quick pace thinking that they had to arrive before the youth changed his mind; Urz walked beside the old Earl. Damad followed several steps behind with a face which doesn’t seem to be interested.

Mashas looked at Urz with a sidelong glance, and after a pause of about two breaths, opened his mouth.

“You said that you were Urz, but where did that name come from? You have no memory, right?”

“Yes. Being thrown various questions of whether I can remember something...”

Urz talked about the story where he was lying down on the seashore, that he was found and nursed by a fishing village. Also about the events which led to him calling himself Urz.

Mashas who heard it shook his gray beard and slowly sighed.

“Urz was the name of Tigrevurmud Vorn’s father...”

As he said up to there, the old Earl suddenly looked back.

“I forgot to ask, but who is that Muozinel person?”

“That guy is called Damad... Simply put, he’s a benefactor. He saved me when I was attacked by bandits.”

“Is that so? I have to thank him later.”

To Mashas’ words, Urz had mixed feelings. He kept silent about the fact that he tried to kill him, but he wondered what kind of reaction this old Earl would show if he were to speak of it.

While walking side by side with Mashas, Urz felt a strange sensation. As expected, he felt like he had met this person somewhere. If he heard more stories or if he met Mashas’ companions, he might possibly regain his memory.

The reality of not knowing who he is became a vague uneasiness and lurked in the innermost depths of Urz’s heart. All the more so after he especially had a mysterious experience such as the black bow.

Before long, the three men arrived before a certain inn. It was an inn whose structure was a solid two-storied building. A small stable for letting horses rest was also linked to it.

When they entered the inn, there were stairs to the second floor on the right and a counter (for reception) on the left. At the center, a corridor extended straight.

“In which room are your companions?”

"It's immediately after we go up the stairs."

When Mashas finished speaking, Urz began to run. Mashas shouted "wait" from behind, but he ignored him and vigorously ran up the stairs.

The shock when he saw Mashas still remained in the depths of his heart. In the end, he was not able to remember, but if he saw the other two, he might remember something.

In meeting Mashas and having talked with him, some scenes within Urz's memory became clear. But, because the anteroposterior connection (between front and back) [\[2\]](#) did not become clear, he didn't know what he did when and where. That irritation pushed the youth's back.

—If I meet those people, surely...!

As soon as he finished going up stairs, Urz knocked on a wooden door. He pushed it without waiting for a reply.

"Eh"

Having emitted a short voice of surprise was a chestnut-haired girl who was in the room. Inside, there was also one more person, a girl with dull golden hair.

The two girls opened their eyes wide and stared at Urz who opened the door. Urz also stood stock still on the spot in blank amazement and fixedly stared at the two girls.

Within the room dimly illuminated by the light of a lamp, the two girls, only wearing underwear had their white skin exposed. In their hands, thinly-made clothes without sleeves were grasped as they were in the middle of changing.

Titta's body was slender; her bodily build was overall thin as well as both her arms and feet. However, a faint charm started to drift in the constriction of her bosom and waist and it indicated that she was growing up.

Lim, although tall, was the owner of a balanced body, and while her arms and feet looked thin, they possessed much unstoppable flexibility. It was the body of a warrior that chipped off useless meat and was well trained. But, while being so, it was beautiful and by no means rough.

The swelling of her rich chest peeped out to about the upper half, and from there, the area between the bottom (of her chest) and waist were hidden by the thinly-made clothes grasped in her hands. But, even only the upper half passed enough to imagine the size and heaviness.

Under her waist, there were well tightened, sensual thighs.

"...Tigre-sama?"

"Lord Tigrevurmud...?"

「.....ティグル様？」

「ティグルバルムド卿？」



Hoarse voices leaked respectively from Titta's and Lim's mouths. The two of them were surprised to the extent that they dropped the clothes that they were holding. In that instance, Lim's chest greatly bounced.

To the sound emitted when the clothes dropped on the floor, Urz finally came to his senses. He turned around, began to run, missed his footing and splendidly fell down.

A loud sound also resounded inside Titta's and Lim's room, and the two girls, startled, looked at each other. Titta's face turned bright red and she crouched down on the spot. Lim also blushed and while hiding her chest with her left hand, she confusedly ran up to the doorway and vigorously closed the door.

The shock of the reunion was completely blown away to somewhere else, and until Mashas knocked on the door, the two girls had sat down on the spot silently.

After walking a little from the inn where Mashas and company were staying at, there was a bar. It was a shop which opened from before noon and served not only alcohol, but also several dishes. The five of them entered that shop.

They sat around a big square table. With his hand, Urz was rubbing his face which still hurt, Titta looked downward as she was embarrassed and Lim had a displeased look. Damad and Mashas looked amazed.

"May we order?"

"Please. And, I will pay for my own share."

It was for precaution that Damad said this. He did not expect to meet Tigrevurmud Vorn's acquaintances in such a place. He thought that even if there was a possibility, it would be after arriving at the Imperial Palace.

Since he did not know what would happen from now on, he should not have imprudently taken out money and involved himself in this.

Mashas and the two girls introduced themselves first. Then, Urz and Damad briefly explained about themselves, too. At that time, Mashas bowed his head as he recalled.



"For having saved Tigre... this youth from bandits, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

The Muozinel young man did not say anything, but he showed a slightly stained expression. Urz also had slightly mixed feelings.

The dishes arrived.

A basket filled with bread, stew served in a tureen which let steam rise, cheese finely cut, red turnip and spinach salad filled the table. Urz and Damad's stomachs growled almost at the same time.

However, it couldn't be called a meal in a peaceful atmosphere.

Damad silently endeavored in the meal, and Mashas made a face saying "what's up with him?" Titta's face was still bright red and she did not make eye contact with Urz. Lim hardly tried to speak, too.

When several plates were emptied, Urz asked resolutely.

"What kind of human being was Tigrevurmud Vorn?"

Mashas and Titta looked at each other. Lim opened her mouth then.

"I do not mind talking about him, but..."

Lim continued without destroying her calm demeanor.

"Before that, could you speak about your life so far, Urz-san?"

After Urz blinked several times, he fixedly stared at Lim's face. He felt somewhat troubled at her utterance. Her blue pupils in her unamiable face calmly stared back at the youth.

-Ah, I see.

Urz finally noticed. This was because she called him "Urz" quite naturally. From after Mashas had met him until they came here, he had not been called by the name "Urz" even once.

It was only that, and yet Urz's heart became somewhat light. He pulled himself together, opened his mouth and talked about how he spent his life so far.

About the fact that he was lying on the seashore, was found by a girl of a fishing village and about the name Urz from a vague memory. Then, about the fact that he lived in the fishing village for a while, but one day, they were attacked by pirates and Elizavetta who happened to pass by helped them. And finally about the fact that she ordered him to serve her.

At this, Lim opened her eyes wide and Mashas sighed while stroking his gray beard. Titta absentmindedly opened her mouth and stared at Urz.

"You started from stable boy, became an attendant and then an advisor, huh..."

"The explanation that you were promoted so fast just because your bow skill was highly evaluated doesn't hold up. Isn't there anything else?"

Mashas who pulled himself together and stared at Urz head on. Urz faltered.

As Mashas said, there was something that he did not say. From what he could see Mashas' and Lim's reactions, it looked like he couldn't keep hiding it. Urz rummaged his darkish red hair.

"Can you keep it a secret?"

As he confirmed that all of them nodded, Urz opened his mouth.

"After I expressed my honest thoughts about Master -- Elizavetta-sama's eyes, it looks like she took a liking to me."

"Her eyes...?"

Except Lim, the three others respectively frowned. Only Lim knitted her brows as she witnessed a difficult problem and nodded.

"It's the Rainbow Eyes."

"Ah, the rumored eyes of different colors... A long time ago, I've seen a cat with such eyes."

Mashas who finally understood muttered as he remembered. Seemingly, Titta's memory also seemed to recall it at these words and nodded.

"There are many areas which detest the Rainbow Eyes as a fearful thing. Elizavetta-sama probably had bitter experiences in the past, too."

After saying so, Lim shook her head as if shaking off her inward sympathy. She looked at Urz.

"It isn't as if you have no memory after she helped the people of the fishing village, right?"

"That's right. I properly remember from that point onwards. When I try to think about before I was saved, my mind became fuzzy and I can't clearly remember, but it isn't the case after I was saved."

"Thank you. I generally understand how you have lived until now. Based on that, I would like to ask, but..."

Lim cut her words for a moment there. She seemed to hesitate about whether she should continued to speak as such, but conceiving determination on her blue pupils, she opened her mouth.

"Are you satisfied with your present life?"

"...What do you mean?"

Unable to guess Lim's intention, Urz asked. Lim indifferently answered.

"Exactly as I stated. If you appreciated the life in which you serve Elizavetta-sama and want to continue, then we will go back as such."

At her words, Mashas and Titta half rose to their feet from their chairs. The two people of Brune overlooked Lim with amazed faces.

"W-What do you mean?"

Titta, whose face turned pale, emitted a loud voice. Though Mashas was silent, he probably felt the same way as her; he shook his gray beard. Lim answered without breaking her calm at all.

"You may say that Urz-san has his clear memory as Urz, but he has no memory as Tigrevurmud Vorn."

"We were also told that by Eleonora-sama..."

"Yes. But, she did not know what it was specifically. And, both we and Eleonora-sama do not know a way of regaining lost memories."

Interrupting the words of Titta who desperately argued, Lim said plainly. Titta and Mashas gasped. Damad put on an expression as if expecting something.

"It is easy to take Urz-san along to LeitMeritz as Lord Tigrevurmud. However, will it be really good for him?"

Lim's blue pupils gazed straight at Urz.

"If he does not recover his memory at this rate, Urz-san will be forced to live the life of another person who is Tigrevurmud Vorn. The surrounding people will call him Lord Tigrevurmud and treat him like that; he will grieve for not having his memory and people will sympathize with him. Eyes will not be turned to the person called Urz after today."

"B-But..."

Titta tried to rebut, but was not able to think of something. Lim said.

"Urz-san, your life can be considered to be substantial. You were highly evaluated by Elizavetta-sama, and you also have friendly colleagues. There seems to be small quarrels, but that is not only limited to Urz-san, it is something unavoidable when adapting into a foreign land."

Urz lightly nodded. The look thrown at a stranger, whether it be in the fishing village or in the lodgings of the Imperial Palace's stablemen, had always followed Urz around. It was something that only time solved.

Lim continued.

"We are convinced that you are Tigrevurmud Vorn. However, as I said earlier, we do not know a way of recovering your memory. Of course, we can exert ourselves so that your memory returns, but it may never return."

He wasn't able to say that it was impossible. Actually, with fragmented scenes appearing, he did not think that he was Tigrevurmud Vorn.

Lim said with a severe expression.

"Therefore, I would like you to choose. Which path will you follow?"

Living here in Lebus as Urz?

Or, going away from here as Tigrevurmud Vorn?

A heavy silence flew down on the place. As a time of nearly ten counts passed, Urz asked with a painful expression.

"If I say that I will remain here, what will you do?"

"As I said earlier, we will go back."

Without showing a shaken behavior, Lim immediately replied.

"Two swords do not fit into one sheath. You were not Tigrevurmud Vorn. Tigrevurmud Vorn fell into the sea and lost his life. That's all. I think that Eleonora-sama also considered this and sent me here."

Mashas had already decided to watch the course of events in silence.

Lim told a small lie. If she thought for Ellen's sake, even if she was to drag him, she should take Urz and return. As for Mashas, when he thought about Regin who was in Brune's royal palace, he also thought that he should pull apart Urz from here.

But while understanding that, Lim asked with a severe expression. If she were to think for this youth's sake, she thought that she should do so.

—Did I really think about Tigre?

Mashas asked himself. *No, I thought about Tigre.* Though Regin would be surprised if she knew the situation, she would accept this youth as Tigre. While waiting for the day when his memory would return, she would definitely let this youth walk his life as Tigrevurmud Vorn.

There was no room for the life of the youth called Urz to enter there.

Both Mashas and Titta had thought that it was natural. That Urz was only impurities (a foreign matter) within Tigrevurmud Vorn.

However, Lim did not see it like that. In deference to Urz, she was going to let him choose his path for the future. Even though the feeling of wanting to meet Tigre should be strong even to her.

On the other hand, Urz was troubled.

—Even if she asks me which path to choose...

In that case, it was better to live as Urz. Tigre might be a hero. Probably, Titta and Mashas really thought of Tigre as an important person. After all, they came to look for him from the far away country of Brune. And he was also probably loved by many other people.

But for Urz, they were strangers.

He had also said it to Naum before, but he didn't feel like it was about him. No matter how many uncertain scenes of his memory appeared in his mind.

Silence fell once again. Urz putting his clenched fist on his lap dropped his look on the table. Lim and company waited for the youth to open his mouth without urging him.

A time of about 30 counts passed. Urz took a small breath and raised his face.

"Could you wait until I make a decision? I won't feel at ease with an indecisive answer."

Urz's face was earnest. The intent of trying to run away could not be seen in his black pupils.

"Limalisha-san. It's as you said. Even I don't know whether or not my memory will return in the future. Perhaps, it might stay like this my whole life. Above all, I don't feel inconvenience in living as Urz. But--"

Urz continued.

"Just because I don't remember, I don't want to avert my eyes to what I've probably done. I think that I should know and face the man called Tigrevurmud Vorn."

Urz continued.

"Though it will be after I obtain master -- Vanadis-sama's permission, I will go to Brune. I will strive to regain my memory by visiting the land where Tigrevurmud Vorn was born and raised."

"However", Urz continued.

"Even if I was to regain my memory, I can't guarantee whether or not I will return to my life as Tigrevurmud Vorn."

"I do not mind that."

Lim calmly answered. She looked at Titta and Mashas.

"U-Understood."

It was Titta who answered first. She tightly clenched her small hands and said.

"What is important is for Tigre-sama... no, Urz-san to regain his memory. Please let me help on that!"

Mashas looked at Titta and Lim with a bitter face, sighed and nodded.

"I understand. I think that what Limalisha-dono said is right."

"Well then, let's go to the Imperial Palace."

Although holding vague uneasiness, Urz said with a resolved face. He did not know how Elizavetta would react. But, even if he were to live as Urz, he could not give up on his lost memory. He wanted the red-haired Vanadis to understand that.

The five people left the shop.

At that time, Mashas said as he recalled.

"Limalisha-dono. Sorry, but I want to look at the horses' state. Can you come with me?"

It was about the three horses that they left in the care of the inn. Not only Lim who was told these words, but also Damad frowned.

"We can do that later, can't we? Should we not hurry to the Imperial Palace now?"

"I understand your feelings, but if you ask me, it's the opposite. Assuming that we go to the Imperial Palace and meets Vanadis-dono, we don't even know whether or not we will leave by the end of today. Don't tell me that you will temporarily excuse yourself just because you are worried about the horses. It's best to get miscellaneous things over with earlier."

"You're right. I understand. What will you do, Titta?"

Lim looked at the chestnut-haired girl. After turned her look at Urz once, Titta shook her head.

"I will be waiting here with Ti... Urz-san."

"We will finish as soon as possible."

Lim said so and walked to the inn with Mashas. Urz, Damad and Titta were left behind.

--Hey, can I have a minute?"

Seeing off the back of Mashas and Lim, Damad called out to Titta. Although the chestnut-haired girl shook her shoulders as she was startled, she eagerly straightened up her back, thrust out her chest and looked up at Damad.

"W-What is it?"

To her reaction like that of a small animal, Damad lifted the edge of his mouth and laughed.

"It's not that big a deal. I'll be borrowing this guy for a little while."

When he finished speaking, Damad gripped Urz's arm. Ignoring the puzzled Urz, the Muozinel young man began to walk. In a place about ten steps away from Titta who stood stock still dumbfounded, he stopped.

"What's the matter?"

After bowing to Titta, Urz turned around to Damad.

"Shall we part here?"

Suddenly, Damad laughed and said that. To Urz who frowned, Damad continued.

"I said it, right? For what purpose I have traveled to such a place."

In order to kill Tigrevurmud Vorn. Damad said so.

"Judging from the story of those guys, it seems that you're really Tigrevurmud Vorn. In that case, we can no longer afford to act together."

"...What about the reward for having brought me until here?"

Suddenly feeling loneliness, Urz asked. He was the man who tried to kill him. It was also hard to say that he had a good character. But, it was too sudden a parting.

"Let's consider it as a loan."

Saying so, Damad turned his back on Urz. Urz called out to his back.

"Thank you for having brought me to here."

His back still turned, Damad replied in a dry tone.

"Listen, Urz. Don't forget my words."

Seeing off Damad, Urz returned to Titta's side.

"What happened to that person?"

To Titta who shyly asked, Urz awkwardly smiled.

"It was just the right time, so we've decided to part here."

Mashas who returned to the inn first checked the horses' state. Then, after paying a silver coin to the storekeeper, he asked that he wanted him to look after them for about three days for the time being. As he finished with that, the old Earl said to Lim.

"Sorry, but can I have you write a letter addressed to Eleonora-dono of LeitMeritz?"

Mashas' expression was extremely serious. He continued his explanation.

"Elizavetta Fomina-dono was it? I don't know that person's nature. In the worst case, there is also the possibility that we will be imprisoned in the Imperial Palace and it'll be pretended that we didn't come here."

"Such a thing..."

Lim could not deny it. This was because when she recalled the story that she heard from Ellen in LeitMeritz and the one she heard from Urz a while ago, it was clear that Elizavetta held a strong goodwill towards that darkish red-haired youth.

Besides, there was Titta. When push comes to shove, Lim was prepared to wield her sword; she had also accumulated training for that. It was probably the same for Mashas.

However, Titta had never held a sword, she was just a maid. Lim should adopt measures not only for herself, but also for Titta.

Lim nodded and then groaned as she realized a certain thing.

"Even you say to send a letter, the time to look for a merchant with a great influence is..."

In the case of delivering a letter to somewhere far away, one would give it to a servant if he's a noble or to a messenger if he's in an army, but the sole person a commoner could ask was a merchant. And it had to be a well-known merchant who took root in a town or city. This was because they were well known by peddlers who moved continuously from town to town.

They knew which peddler was going to head to which town or village. Therefore, they received the letter from the client with a payment and entrusted it to the peddler.

In addition, if it was a merchant with a great influence, he would always have multiple people who could have the letter promptly delivered. Even in case that there was no peddler who went to that village or town (wanted destination), he would find a way to deliver the letter.

Of course, there were probably such merchants in this castle town. But, Mashas and company just arrived a few days ago. To Lim which let impatience blur in her blue pupils, Mashas however shook his head.

"Then, there is no problem. I already looked for one. I also checked how much it costs."

Lim looked at Mashas with a face which could not hide her surprise. And she asked in a tone to confirm.

"Have you thought about it since before we arrived at the castle town?"

"At least to the extent that there might be the necessity of sending an urgent letter. If I use the name of the touring knight Mashas Rodant, I won't be suspicious even if I pile up money and entrust an urgent letter."

Lim could not help but smile wryly at Mashas' words. She did not expect that he would come to use the setup "turning knight" in such a place.

"Understood. But in that case, I think that we should send it to the Imperial Palace of Regnitz, and ask them to send a messenger from there to LeitMeritz."

Regnitz was located in the middle of Lebus and LeitMeritz. And, the Imperial Palace of Regnitz was friendly to Ellen.

They were secretly thankful to the silver-haired Vanadis who desperately rode a horse, hid her name and was present at Vanadis Sasha's death. It was something that both Mashas and Lim felt when they stopped by Regnitz due to this trip.

"That's right. If it's them, they're definitely trustworthy."

"Yes. By the way, what should we write for the letter's contents?"

"That Urz was Tigre. That he did not regain his memory. And that if possible, we would like her to send someone. After all, what will become necessary no matter what, is a way to get in touch with the outside in case we are imprisoned in the Imperial Palace."

Thus, the two of them left the hotel when Lim finished writing the letter.

Mashas who came out of the inn, seeing that there were only the two people Urz and Titta, stroke his gray beard wonderingly.

"Where is that Muozinel young man?"

"Since he brought me up to here, he said that we shall part."

Urz answered as he let loneliness somewhat blur on his face.

"Hmm. Since he is your benefactor, I should have properly thanked him."

Mashas who didn't doubt Urz's words muttered such an impression which made the youth smile wryly. He thought that it was good that he didn't tell them about the fact that they fought in a forest. If they knew that, neither Mashas nor Lim would probably let Damad escape.

After they stopped by a certain merchant's residence by Mashas' request, Urz and company headed again to the Imperial Palace.



The castle gate of the Imperial Palace was wrapped in noise due to Urz's slightly dirty figure.

It was known by many people that this youth disappeared several days ago. Also about the fact that by Elizavetta's order, Naum had sent soldiers for his search.

Not only did that Urz return in an awful appearance, he even brought unknown man and women. It was no wonder that the place was thrown into an uproar.

"Including your awful appearance, there are various things I would like to ask you, but... Who are the three people behind you?"

The familiar gatekeeper asked Urz without hiding his suspicion. The youth answered with a wry smile.

"They were visitors to Naum-san. I am sorry, but could you pass that on him?"

Since he thought that it would become a serious matter if he gave the name of Elizavetta, he decided to have him call Naum first. If it's him, he would manage it well.

As they waited before the castle gate, Naum appeared before long gasping for breath. He, who received the report from a soldier, had literally jumped out of his office.

But, he had still left his calm. As he drew close to Urz, Naum noticed Mashas and company standing near the youth.

The knight in his prime adjusted his breathing and quickly fixed his disorderly hair and clothes. His expression was tinged with dignity not as Urz's boss, but one which should be called that of a knight of Lebus.

"Who are you?"

Mashas took a step forward and answered.

"I am Mashas Rodant, one who was granted the land of Aude and the title of Earl also gratefully from Her Highness the Princess in the Brune Kingdom. I came on this occasion because I would like to talk about something important."

Naum's face turned pale at the Bruneman's words. Mashas' greeting was polite without interval, and Naum was also impressed with the old Earl's will's strength.

But, Naum was also a man who served the Imperial Palace for a long time. As he quietly took a breath, he politely responded with a smiling face.

"Excuse me for my behavior. Welcome, Your Excellency Earl Rodant. I am called Naum and I serve this Imperial Palace's lord Elizavetta Fomina-sama. Unfortunately, my lord is currently absent and while presumptuous, I shall act as your conversation partner."

As they were guided by Naum, Urz and company passed through the Imperial Palace's door. It looked like Naum was heading to the reception room. Urz walked with long strides and drew beside Naum.

"Naum-san. I--"

"Leave it for later, Urz."

Urz opened his eyes wide. Naum's profile was unusually severe.

"You have brought them, so I can roughly guess the situation. It might be better to hear the circumstances in detail from you. But, I would first like to talk with Earl Rodant. I want you to remain silent as much as possible."

"...Understood."

Being overawed by a quiet appeal, Urz could only nod.

Naum guided Mashas and company to the reception room inside the Imperial Palace.

A carpet from Muozinel was laid out on the floor and a silver water jug decorated a corner of the room. A table of ebony was arranged in the center so that it was interposed between two sofas. Although luxurious, it was a room which gave a calm impression without emphasizing gaudiness.

Naum first recommended the sofa to Mashas and company and after waiting for the three people to sit, he also sat down on the sofa of the opposite side. Urz sat next to Naum.

"Is it all right for me to sit with this appearance as is?"

Urz asked Naum in a low voice while pulling the hem of his clothes. The knight in his prime answered without looking at Urz.

"I don't mind. Though you should clean the dirt of the place afterwards, time is precious now."

Then, Naum called a servant and ordered him to prepare drinks for the guests. Moreover, he added this in a casual tone.

"Speaking of which, I wonder where Lazarl-dono went. Could you tell him that an urgent matter came up?"

"Understood."

The servant respectfully bowed and left the reception room.

"Who is Lazarl-dono?"

"What, he's just a colleague."

Naum smoothly dodged the question of Mashas who feigned a casual behavior. He opened his mouth without pausing.

"Now then, with all due respect to Your Excellency Earl Rodant, for what kind of business did you come for? I would like to hear it first and then convey it to my lord the Vanadis."

"Naum-dono, do you know a man called Tigrevurmud Vorn?"

Without even an introduction, Mashas directly cut to the chase. A fire was just earlier put in the fireplace of this room; so it was not cold, but you could not say that it was warm, either. Nevertheless, cold sweat ran through Naum's back.

"Yes. He is a famous person after all. He's the hero suppressed Brune's civil war and afterwards, as a guest General in the LeitMeritz dukedom--"

"Urz who is there--" Mashas said as he interrupted Naum's words.

"What do you say about him being Tigrevurmud Vorn?"

Lim, Titta and Urz held their breath. The reception room was wrapped in a tense atmosphere.

"...It is the first time that I hear of that. It's a very interesting talk."

After a short pause, Naum calmly responded.

"Hou. Are you saying that you're hearing of this for the first time?"

Fighting spirit flickered in Mashas's eyes. His gray beard seemed to shake as it was stirred up with its owner's feelings. However, Naum warded off the old Earl's anger without changing his complexion at all.

"Your Excellency Earl Rodant, do you know that Urz here has lost his memory?"

"I heard it from the person himself."

"Then, I shall ask you, but on what basis do you judge that Urz is Tigrevurmud Vorn?"

It should be said to be impudent. Naum threw a question to Mashas. To Mashas who fell silent, Naum continued.

"It's now about sixty or seventy days since I met Urz for the first time. I saw him when I was accompanying Vanadis-sama as she took a walk to a certain shore of Regnitzta."

At that time, Urz, blended in with the villagers, and shot down a sea bird. And, they were attacked by pirates who suddenly appeared. Naum briefly explained this.

"Did you also hear this story from Urz?"

Mashas nodded. Confirming it, Naum continued.

"When we met Urz, he had already lost his memory and he only had the name Urz, a preeminent bow skill and an honest heart shine. And except for the name, Vanadis-sama was very pleased with the latter two and took him as a servant."

When he said up to there, the servant carried the drinks over. There were two kinds, wine with spicy grass and wine diluted with honey. Since there were two women among the visitors, Naum considered that.

"This one with soaked spicy grass is a little hot, but it warms the body. I think that this one containing honey will be all right for your companions."

“Thank you for your consideration.”

Mashas courteously bowed his head. And when he raised his face, the old Earl continued his words.

“Speaking of which, I haven’t introduced them yet.”

Mashas turned his look to Lim and said.

“This is Limalisha. She acts as the adjutant of LeitMeritz’s Vanadis Eleonora-dono who’s famous as the “Wind Princess of the Silver Flash”.”

The movements of Naum who was holding the bottle of wine stopped for an instant. Lim kept silent and politely bowed. Then, Mashas moved his head to the other side and looked at Titta.

“This is Titta. She is a girl born and raised in Alsace located in the northeast of the Brune Kingdom.”

“...Oh my, you came here from a far-off place.”

Naum carefully put the bottle of wine on the table. Saying that was the best he could do to hide his unrest. Mashas pretended to not notice such a reaction and continued.

“This girl has a relation with Tigrevurmud Vorn that can be considered as brother and sister. She had been by Earl Vorn since they were children and spent time together. Despite being a 16-year-old young girl, she is a girl to whom Earl Vorn entrusts with all things within his mansion.”

“Hou. Being trusted that much by the Earl, she is a splendid young lady.”

Naum answered with a sweet smile. Mashas also continued with a smile.

“When it was decided that Earl Vorn would head to LeitMeritz as a guest General, he left Brune bringing only this girl with him. There is that much of a relationship of mutual trust between the two of them.”

“I see. By the way, let’s go back to the main topic, but Your Excellency Earl Rodant, on what basis did you judge Urz to be Earl Vorn?”

The back of Naum who asked so was already soaking wet with sweat. Even Lim and Titta who were sitting on Mashas’ both sides were a threat to him. He must quickly seize the initiative. Naum said without breaking his dignified attitude.

“The face is the same. He is good at archery. Even if such things are enumerated, I can only answer that there is also such a thing. He has lost his memory, but even so, it doesn’t necessarily mean that Urz is Earl Vorn.”

“Do you know the name of Earl Vorn’s father?”

The question of Mashas said in a casual tone took Naum by surprise. To the knight in his prime who tilted his head to the side, Mashas said.

“He is called Urz. Do you say that this is also a coincidence?”

“--I can’t say otherwise.”

No matter what, he could not afford to admit that here. It would be different if Urz admitted it, but otherwise, Naum did not intend to nod.

“Did you hear about the story where Eleonora-dono called out to Elizavetta-dono in the battlefield the other day?”

“I heard about it. However, LeitMeritz’s Vanadis-sama immediately admitted her fault and apologized to our Vanadis-sama. Will you not damage LeitMeritz’s Vanadis-sama’s honor if you bring it up again?”

This time, Titta opened her mouth as she could not endure the tense air.

“Um... Could you lend us Urz-san?”

“What do you mean by lend?”

Naum asked with a dubious face. Titta eagerly spun her words.

“I think that Urz-san also wants to regain his memory. So, if we take him along to Brune and he sees places such as the towns or villages of Alsace, his memory may return...”

Although she was out of breath at the end and her words were also tottering, anyway Titta said what she should say. Mashas also nodded as to show that he thought so, too.

“Naum-dono. Don’t you think that Titta’s proposal is reasonable? Haven’t you also recalled many times where you were troubled about the fact that Urz’s memory is lost?”

“Certainly. I am also anxious about Urz’s memory.”

While soaking his mouth with wine that was poured into a silver cup, Naum made such a solemn expression that it was unnatural.

The knight in his prime felt inwardly relieved. He was afraid of whether Mashas and company might have conclusive evidence which connected Urz and Tigre, but it did not seem to be the case.

“However, I think that for him now more than regaining his memory, I would like him to give priority to get used and adapt to the current environment. I said it some time ago, but it still has been only a few days since he came to serve to this Imperial Palace. Moreover--”

As if pressed for an answer, Naum continued.

“Urz has the very important duty of being the Vanadis adviser.”

Actually, even Naum was puzzled on whether or not it was an important duty, but it was enough for a bluff. The knight of a pessimistic nature continued with a straight face.

"I think that if it is you, Your Excellency Earl Rodant, you can understand that if it's a person who has an important duty, he must give priority to official businesses over his personal feelings. Well, even if he goes to Brune, it will be in about three years later at the earliest."

Naum thought that if it was in three years, it would be possible to cut off Urz from his lost memory and make him a person of Lebus.

Although Elizavetta was fond of Urz, he would not do something like abuse that. He would diligently do the assigned work. He would give results whether it be war or mediation. And there would someday be those who would acknowledge him and become his friends.

Afterwards also, Naum kept dodging noncommittally Mashas' questioning. Unless conclusive evidence, which showed that Urz was Tigre, was presented, he intended to dodge the questioning.

Mashas who finally grew impatient said indignantly.

"Naum-dono. I will ask, but has Vanadis-dono the same thoughts as you?"

"I cannot assert so, but I do not think that there is a big difference. In the first place, Your Excellency Earl Rodant. Do you think a human who fell into the winter sea at night would live and reach the shore? I do not mind even telling you the place of the fishing village which saved Urz. It would be impossible anyway that someone could live after that."

"Could you allow me to talk directly with Vanadis-dono?"

"About that, I am sorry, but I cannot answer immediately."

Naum thought that he succeeded in escaping.

"I said it a while ago, but Vanadis-sama has left for a long-term inspection. If you are all right with waiting for when Vanadis-sama returns, then..."

"Very well. I would like for you to arrange as such."

Regaining his usual dignity, Mashas answered.

"I do not know about when Vanadis-sama will return, but even so it is all right?"

Mashas nodded. Naum lowly surveyed the three people.

"Well then, I shall prepare guest rooms for you. I shall make sure that you can spend time without inconvenience while being here in this Imperial Palace."

Naum bowed his head courteously. The other parties were an Earl of the Brune Kingdom and Ellen's adjutant. Besides, not only was the maid pleased with the old Earl before her eyes, but she was trusted by Tigre and also had a good relation with Ellen. Not a single one of them was a visitor whom they could treat roughly.

—If I make a mistake, it will become a war against Brune and LeitMeritz...

Naum was inwardly thankful to Mashas. He thought that he would take a more oppressive attitude, but he was an old man who could discern reason. If he establish time and discussed, he would probably make up a reason that would be a little better.

Naum lightly tapped Urz's shoulder and stood up from the sofa.

"Well then, wait for a little while in this room. When the rooms' preparations are done, I will have you called."

As he bowed, Naum left the reception room along with Urz.

As he left the reception room and walked about ten steps, Naum stopped. He rounded his back without minding the public gaze and heaved a grand sigh. The clothes which he wore were damply wet with sweat due to strain.

"Every one of them is a fearful person. I will leave it to Lazarl-dono next time."

Mashas and company probably didn't think that they would settle it with only one talk. He was also concerned about the fact that Lim remained silent. She might be inquiring his attitude.

"--Naum-san."

Urz reservedly called out to him. Naum looked back at the youth and smiled wryly.

"You did well to have remained silent at that place. Even though there were probably many things you wanted to say."

Naum was able to keep he did not know because Urz had said nothing. If this darkish red-haired youth had blurted out something along the lines that he might be Tigre, Naum probably wouldn't have been able to keep a dignified attitude up to there.

However, Urz shook his head.

"Let's forget about me. More importantly, about master having gone for long-term inspection..."

To Urz's words, Naum's expression increased with dreadfulness at a stretch. The Knight of Lebus seemed to have immediately changed his thinking.

"I've precisely ran here because I wanted to ask you about it. I didn't think that you would come back with such visitors."

Naum seemed to be talking about the fact that he appeared at the castle gate out of breath when Urz returned. Urz also put on a serious expression thinking that something happened after all.

"It isn't something we can speak about in the corridor. Let's find a good place somewhere..."

As Naum was absorbed in thought, there was a voice which called out to them from a distant place. When they looked there, Lazarl was running in frenzy. When the old civil official stopped before Urz and Naum, he spent a time of about five counts to fix his breathing.

"Lazarl-dono. If you overdo it, it'll affect your body."

"This much doesn't even count as overdoing it. More importantly--"

While wiping sweat on his forehead with the sleeve of his official outfit, Lazarl turned a severe look at Urz.

"I heard that apparently rare visitors came."

"Let's postpone that talk. Is there a suitable room somewhere?"

Naum as well as the old civil official looked at Urz. Lazarl nodded.

"It will be all right in the office. After all, there is no one who enters that room in this situation."

Lazarl began to walk as soon as he finished speaking, and Naum followed the old civil official after exchanging looks with Urz. Urz, not understanding what was going on, followed the two men, too.

—It's quite flurried...

When they were heading to the reception room, probably because there were the presence of Mashas and company, he was tense and did not notice, but a tense atmosphere was drifting in the whole Imperial Palace. For some reason, the soldiers walked with quick steps, and a shadow of uneasiness could be seen on the maids' and court ladies' faces. There were also those who turned strange looks to Urz.

When they entered the office, Naum casually leaned on the door. It was in order to not let other people enter. Lazarl also, not even turning on light, stared at Urz. Only the feeble sunlight coming in through the window dimly illuminated the interior of the room.

"That's a fairly awful appearance, Urz."

"Um, many things happened."

Urz who rummaged his darkish red hair answered. Lazarl nodded.

"I'm sorry to have a talk with you without letting you even changes clothes. Let alone dash hot water over yourself, but this is an urgent matter. Listen well. Vanadis-sama had disappeared this morning."

Urz opened wide his eyes. Naum said in a curt tone.

"I said long-term inspection, but that's what we ostensibly said. Since we can't declare it openly."

Urz finally knew the real nature of the tense atmosphere drifting in the Imperial Palace. And then, he cocked his head in puzzlement as he repeated Lazarl's words in his head.

"I'm sorry. You said this morning, but did master come back before that?"

Naum and Lazarl looked at each other. Wandering his look about in the air Naum thought about it, but he gave a nod and turned to Urz.

"All right. First of all, we will tell you what we heard from Vanadis-sama. You remember that day when Vanadis-sama went out with you to take a walk?"

Confirming that Urz nodded, Naum explained from start to end. Though Urz was surprised when he heard that she came back with a body full of bruises on the next day, he felt relieved that Elizavetta was safe.

After Naum and Lazarl told about what happened to Elizavetta, they said that she passed time without almost moving from her bedroom until last night. Naum and company thought that it was probably due to fatigue and injury, and that it was better to have her rest for earlier recovery.

However this morning, when a court lady went to wake Elizavetta, she was not there. Moreover, there was a note on the table.

"Such contents were written on the letter with Vanadis-sama's handwriting. 'I am sorry for causing you to worry. I will be back after about ten days.'"

Naum sighed deeply.

"Vanadis-sama is hiding something from us. Therefore, I would like to ask you, Urz. Do you have any idea where Vanadis-sama went?"

"I don't know where she went, but..."

Urz faltered. He removed his look from the two men and stared at the floor. Naum leaned forward.

"If you know something, tell us. Even any trivial thing is all right."

To his words, Urz also strengthened his determination. He raised his face and gazed at Naum and Lazarl.

"I have a request. I want you to accept what I will tell you from now on as fact. No matter how much it may sound absurd."

Naum and Lazarl looked at each other again. Urz's words were strange, but the youth's black pupils were filled with sincere brightness and his tone was earnest. Above all, they knew that he was not someone who would spoke of a joke in such a situation. Naum urged Urz as he nodded.

"It's when I accompanied master for a walk on that day."

Naum who heard Urz's story was first dumbfounded, and then amazed. He knitted his brows, frowned and turned towards Urz eyes like when he saw an unknown dish.

However, Lazarl showed a different reaction. When he heard the name Baba Yaga, the old civil official gasped and tightly grasped a fist as if enduring fear.

When Urz finished talking, an unnatural silence flew down in the office.

"The Vanadis-sama's story that a dragon suddenly appeared was also general, but..."

After a blank of about ten counts, Naum muttered with a wry face. The knight in his prime turned his gaze to Lazarl and noticed then that his attitude was strange.

Lazarl asked Urz with a painful expression.

"Yaga... Are you sure that Vanadis-sama said so?"

When Urz nodded, Lazarl looked up at the sky.

"It was the day when Vanadis-sama came back to the Imperial Palace. I was ordered to do a certain thing by Vanadis-sama. It was to investigate which of Lebus' run-down temples enshrines Baba Yaga."

This time, it was Naum's complexion which changed.

"Such a monster is actually..."

Starting to say up to there, Naum swallowed his words. He saw the pirates' leader transformed into a huge white monster. Even when the two Vanadis Sasha and Elizavetta finally defeated that monster.

"Then, does it mean that Vanadis-sama is going around the waste shrines one by one in order to kill that monster named Baba Yaga?"

When Naum muttered, Lazarl deeply bowed his head.

"I'm sorry. If I knew that things would become like this, I would have stalled for time and consulted with you..."

"No, Lazarl-dono. If we didn't hear Urz's story, we wouldn't have arrived at this conclusion."

Naum shook his head. Certainly, with only Lazarl's story, he would think that the waste shrines were suspicious. But it was difficult to connect them to Elizavetta's actions. He could not afford to have soldiers head to waste shrines with uncertain information.

"Lazarl-dono, could you tell me the locations of the waste shrines that you reported about to Vanadis-sama?"

Naum said with an earnest expression. Similarly, Lazarl returned to his face as a civil official.

“What will you do?”

“I will prepare 1000 soldiers. I will have a set of 100 cavalrymen respectively head to each waste shrine and bring back Vanadis-sama as soon as they find her.”

“What will you do about Baba Yaga?”

“We will discuss it from now on. Depending on the situation, we may also have to ask Osterode or LeitMeritz for help. If there was a Vanadis in Regnitz, we would have also asked there.”

There was Valentina Glinka Estes in Osterode and Eleonora Viltaria in LeitMeritz. Anyway, what was necessary was a Vanadis.

“Naum-san.”

Urz step forward with a determined expression.

“I will also help. Please, add me to the unit which will look for master.”

Naum showed a slightly surprised face, but he immediately revealed a fearless smile.

“Don’t you need to rest?”

“I’m tired, but now isn’t the time for that.”

“You’re quite right.”

Lazarl smiled wryly, too. Naum nodded and looked at Urz

“All right. Frankly, I’m in need of people’s help as much as I can get. I will entrust you with 100 cavalrymen. If you find Vanadis-sama, even you have to persuade by tears or whatever, anyway bring her back.”

Then as Naum called a subordinate, he ordered him to organize 1000 cavalrymen.

“Have each of them take food for two days. If it runs out, carry another share later. How long will it take?”

Although the subordinate was also surprised at the sudden instructions, he said that it would take about two koku.

“Two koku, huh...”

Naum groaned. The sun had almost reached its zenith. It would be considerably inclined to the west sky. Then, even if he had them depart, the sun would immediately set. However, Naum immediately reconsidered. Even if he had to let the soldiers run all through the night here, he had to look for Elizavetta.

“Have each of them prepare a fur overcoat to wear over armor. Also don’t forget hats, gloves and shoes. Prepare all of this within two koku.”

As he issued instructions like so in piles and the subordinate left, the talk moved to Mashas and the others. This was because it was also necessary to explain the circumstances to Lazarl. The old civil official who heard the story from Naum gave a small nod.

"I understand. I will take over as their conversation partner. Naum-dono, concentrate on the search for Vanadis-sama."

Then, Lazarl looked at Urz.

"Urz. I will check just to be sure, but they didn't have anything which may undoubtedly prove that you are Tigrevurmud Vorn, right?"

At his question, Urz, while hesitating, shook his head.

"There is one thing which occurs to me. --It's a bow."

To the two men who held their breath, Urz explained about the black bow. That strange bow which appeared in his hands in the fight against the Double Headed Dragon.

"That girl Titta said it. That there is a black bow which is the heirloom of the Vorn House."

After Naum and Lazarl looked at each other, they nodded.

"Does it look like you will somehow manage with only that?"

"I haven't seen the real thing, so I can't say anything."

To Lazarl's question, Naum responded while patting the wrinkles of his face. Lazarl put his thoughts in order and turned to Urz. His expression was unusually painful and filled with drive. Sweat blurred on the old civil official's forehead.

"Urz. I don't know whether it's fortunate or not, but with only your talk now, it doesn't prove to be conclusive evidence. If you wish, you may live in Lebus like before. However, I think that days with hardships will continue for a while."

At that time, Lazarl explained to Urz about the fifteen knights.

"Vanadis-sama said that they were attacked by the dragon. Let's go with that for the time being. But, circumstances are what they are. Those who will turn eyes of doubt to you will also appear."

Fifteen people suddenly disappeared and Elizavetta returned to the Imperial Palace full of bruises on the next day. Furthermore, Urz also came back a few days later similarly with a wounded body.

There were probably those among the knights' friends and colleagues that knew that they were jealous of Urz. Even without that, it hadn't been long since Urz worked in the Imperial Palace. He was in the position to be doubted first when something happened.

Naum was watching Urz and Lazarl with a bitter expression. Since he heard beforehand that Lazarl intended to bring up this talk, he had no complaints on that point.

But, it was truly awkward. After having talked with Mashas and company, it sounded as if Lazarl was trying to drive out Urz from Lebus. However, if he does not talk now, Urz might end up making a wrong choice. It was a very unbearable mood.

Lazarl continued talking without changing his complexion at all.

"Moreover, if I judge that Vanadis-sama may be blamed, I intend to pin all the crimes on you."

Tension ran. A heavy silence as if being at the bottom of the sea wrapped the surroundings.

--Understood."

It was Urz who calmly brushed aside that silence.

"I wouldn't be able stand it if master is blamed for this. Besides, it's a fact that they came aiming for me."

Lazarl nodded with a severe expression.

"I adopted measures so that such a thing doesn't happen, but I don't know how he will go down. If you still want to remain in Lebus after being aware of all of what I just said, then I will help you as much as possible."

It would be the least Lazarl could do for him. When Urz expressed his gratitude by saying "Thank you", Lazarl coughed once and continued his words.

"One more thing. When your memory returns, whether you wish to live as Urz or choose to walk the path as Earl Vorn, I will still support you."

Urz looked at Lazarl with a face which could not hide his surprise. It was the same for Naum. The old civil official continued.

"It's your life. No matter which you choose, do it so as to not have any regrets."

On the evening of that day, Urz went to Mashas and the others. It was to inform them about the fact that he would be away from the Imperial Palace.

It might not be necessary to meet them. But, it was certain that their existence was stuck in fragments of his memory. Lazarl's words of "so as to not have any regrets" also supported Urz.

When he visited the guest room where Mashas was, the old Earl welcomed Urz with a strange figure as he wrapped his body in a blanket. Urz could not help but burst into laughter at his appearance, and at the same time he felt a strange nostalgia.

It was also so when he met him for the first time in the main street of the castle town. Not only him, but also when he sat around the table with Titta and Lim, he felt awkward, yet at ease.

—Was it because of that black bow?

After shooting an arrow with a black bow and killing the Double Headed Dragon, Urz was attacked by a strange headache. And, many scenes floated in his head fragmentarily.

—If I were to meet that Vanadis of LeitMeritz now, would I hold a different feeling?

“What’s the matter, Urz-dono?”

One might also say that he settled down as time passed. Mashas called him Urz without hesitating. While Urz was thankful for that, he told him that he would be away for a while from tomorrow on.

“I can’t tell you the details, but...”

When he said so, Mashas kept a watchful eye.

“If it’s all right with you, could you also take me along?”

Urz was bewildered at the unexpected proposal. Mashas continued with words carrying vigor.

“What, by no means will I get in your way. But, as I already said before, we came for you. We can’t go back as such without doing anything. What do you say?”

“That isn’t decided at my own discretion. Besides, it isn’t a safe mission. You’re an honor guest of Imperial Palace, so I can’t take you along...”

As Urz said so, Mashas greatly nodded.

“If it’s not safe, then all the more so. I understated it in the talk with Naum-dono, but if I can’t bring you back with us, my head will probably fly.”

Mashas said with an extremely serious face.

If at this rate, Tigre were to choose to live as Urz and Princess Regin who is in Brune knew that, what kind of reaction would she show? It would be good if he got off with just being ashamed.

“Moreover”, Mashas continued with a calm expression.

“I can’t let you die by a petty thing.”

“—Understood.”

Urz gave up. For some reason, he could not decline this old Earl’s request. That might also be because he was Tigre.

“I will ask Naum-san about it. But, it’s really dangerous, you know?”

“What, I’ve gone through a lot of dangers.”

Mashas responded as if it was nothing. Urz felt his attitude somewhat reliable.

For Urz, one more miscalculation arose. When he talked it through with Naum and went to meet Mashas again, Lim also stood there.

"Allow me to tag along, too."

With an unamiable expression, she said indifferently. Urz, at a loss for words, looked at Mashas.

"She said that if she also can't bring you back with her, she can't shamelessly go back to LeitMeritz. Saying that she can only spend the days in the Imperial Palace by doing nothing won't do as a reason, right"

Seeing Mashas' smile, Urz thought that he was tricked. When they talked some time ago, Mashas had probably predicted that it would turn out like this. Gazing at Lim, the youth said.

"It's really dangerous, you know?"

Lim nodded silently. There was no time to persuade her. Urz sighed.

"Very well. Anyway you two, if something were to happen, please give priority to your own safety."

Urz could only say so. At the same time, he noticed that by just having these two at his side, he strangely felt a sense of security, too.

—That's right. I did have them support me like this after all...

Vague scenes rose in his mind. But, they sank again into darkness before becoming clear. Even though he almost felt like he was able to remember various things.

The three people walked along a corridor wrapped in darkness.

By the way, after Naum who received the report from Urz groaned for a while, he gave the following conditions.

"I will have you obey Urz as a soldier. Even if you happen to get injured, we will absolutely not bear responsibility. Urz is the witness."

It wasn't as if he didn't consider confining Mashas and company, it was the actual condition that he did not want to increase the staff anymore. This was because he lost fifteen knights a few days ago and he had to dispatch 1000 cavalrymen this time.

Besides, considering Elizavetta's precedent, the doubt that Mashas and company might also slip out from the Imperial Palace did not fade away. He understood that the strength of their feelings towards Urz was considerable after talking with them once.

"If so, then it will be rather better to know their whereabouts."

Naum judged so.

Thus, Urz left the Imperial Palace along with Mashas and Lim, leading 100 cavalrymen.

After having seen off Mashas and company, Titta was praying in the guest room given to her. She undid and took down her hair.

The nightclothes she wore were made of silk and the feel of them was good. They were thinly made, but the indoor air wasn't warm enough to not be worrisome basically. It was not warm, but it would be a needless worry once she crawled into the bed.

"Please, protect Tigre-sama."

There was a grim feeling in her voice, but if compared with that of several days ago, it was much brighter.

No matter what might be said, Tigre was alive. And although he left leading soldiers, it did not necessarily mean that he's proceeding to a battlefield. Moreover, if something happens, there was Mashas and Lim by Tigre's side.

Surely the four of them would be able to return to LeitMeritz.

Then after hesitating, Titta prayed like this.

"May that heirloom bow come back to Tigre-sama's hands!"

Titta knew that that black bow was something uncanny. At the same time, she also knew that that black bow often saved Tigre from danger.

"You may use my body however much you want. So, please..."

At this time, Titta directly prayed to Tir Na Fa for the first time.

The darkness which lurked on the ceiling looked down at her. The darkness took a form somehow similar to a bow and there was a will within it, but Titta did not notice.

Well for one, the presence of that will was extremely thin (weak). It had not yet the power to fully manifest on the ground.



The Polesia dukedom was located in the southeast of the Zhcted Kingdom.

The name of the Vanadis governing that land was Sofya Obertas. She was the Vanadis with the nickname of "Brilliant Princess of the Light Flower" and was an impressively beautiful woman with waving golden hair and beryl-colored pupils. She was called Sofy by those close to her.

She wrapped her slender tall figure in a green dress and always carried a golden bishop's staff. To the eyes of those who looked at her, this bishop's staff was reflected as though it was a part of her body. This was the Viralt "Light Flower" which made Sofy a Vanadis.

Now, Sofy was checking something in the library which was in a corner of the Imperial Palace. Sitting in front of a long desk of oak, she opened an old book.

A candlestick was put on the right side of the long desk and a fire burnt on the candle. The books and scrolls, each being old, the edges turned yellow and the characters were blurred.

The usual, gentle smile not being on Sofy's face, she turned over the book with a serious expression. In her left hand, there was a circular lens with a thin chain.

Outside of the Imperial Palace, the wings of night had covered the sky long ago and countless stars were twinkling. It was also the time when most of the people working in the Imperial Palace were sleeping.

However, Sofy, showing no signs of fatigue from government affairs, was silently looking over the book.

She was extremely busy from summer until recently.

As the Zhcted Kingdom's messenger, she proceeded towards the Asvarre Kingdom that was across the sea and was rolled up in the civil war there. When they thought that it was settled by the activities of Tigre and the Vanadis Olga, they were attacked by a demon named Torbalan and a sea dragon on their way back.

Tigre fell into the sea and his welfare (status) was unknown even now. After she stopped by LeitMeritz and talked roughly about it to Ellen who was a close friend, she proceeded to the Capital Silesia and had to report to King Victor. It was after that that she was able to return to Polesia, and half of autumn had passed when she returned to her Imperial Palace.

Even after returning to Polesia, she really had no time to calm down. She had to settle the work that piled up when she was absent. There were many documents which absolutely needed her settlement.

But, she complained only in a form which posed as a joke and strove for the government affairs. Currently for her, the work pressure was also a relief.

At the time Torbalan appeared, Sofy was not able to save Tigre even though she was there. Even though he had saved her in Asvarre.

And, when the death of Alexandra Alshavin who, although a Vanadis like her, was also an important friend was brought to her, her heart grew colder.

"--There are rather too many misfortunes this year, eh."

As a person governing a dukedom, she believed that she was used to a person's death. But as expected, the death of those close to her stood in her heart. Not only the fact that in the case of Tigre, it happened right before her eyes, but there being also the regret of being unable to do anything, her feelings were rather strong.

—At least, let me take revenge.

It was demons that Sofy was investigating about. When she remembered Torbalan's words one by one, that demon undoubtedly knew about the Vanadis. They had knowledge of them that differed from that of humans.

If she was to fight them, she must have knowledge about the enemy even if it's just a little. Those who make light of information would never win no matter what the fight is. Even if they stood temporarily superior by fortune, they would be beaten someday.

As Sofy, who finished looking over the book opened on the desk put the lens which she was holding in her left hand on the desk, she lightly stretched herself. And then, she moved her chair and turned around to look back.

The interior of the room which was illuminated by the candlestick's small fire wasn't so wide. But, except the door and a small window, bookshelves covered the entire wall, hundreds of books lined up in the bookshelves and about the same number of scrolls and epistles were piled up.

These were collected during the several years after Sofy became a Vanadis. There were also the ones which she requested from the nobles of the neighboring countries such as Brune and Muozinel, having paid them money, and having her subordinates transcribe them.

For a private library, it was quite something. There was probably not many people even among the great nobles that had this many books and scrolls.

Sofy, having her beryl-colored pupils filled with the color of irony thought that it was good to collect books.

—I didn't think it would become like this though...

She didn't know yet that Tigrevurmud Vorn was alive. Polesia was in the southeast, and Lebus which Elizavetta governed was in the northeast of Zhcted.

In addition, Sofy wasn't that intimate with Elizavetta, and since she returned to Polesia, she wasn't able to leave the Imperial Palace due to government affairs.



As she finished her short break, Sofy resumed her work. Suddenly, her eyes stopped at a certain description.

“--The King of the Magic Bullet?”

Thinking that they were words that she had heard somewhere before, Sofy wandered her gaze in the air and explored her memory. She was able to remember it without taking too much time.

In the far-off old days. It was the nickname of a certain hero at the time when even this Zhcted Kingdom didn't exist yet on this earth.

The hero's name was not known, and only the fact that it was a man and that nickname were left with little else record. The man who received from a Goddess a bow to surely hit what was aimed at, defeated all his enemies with that bow and finally became a King. People called him the “King of the Magic Bullet”.

“Yes, if I remember correctly, it should have been such a story...”

As she muttered, Sofy returned her look to the book. What she was reading now summarized about the existence of demons and fairies transmitted from ancient times, as well as the gods of old times and the humans who got involved with them. It was no wonder that the title “the King of the Magic Bullet” appeared.

There seemed to be only several lines written about the King of the Magic Bullet, but the characters of a country which fell to ruins long ago were mixed in, there were places incomprehensible in the sentences, and it took considerable time for even Sofy to understand.

—The King of the Magic Bullet is a proxy manifesting the will of a Goddess on Earth. He's a person who sometimes destroys things; inhuman things or sometimes destroys humans. He is someone who goes about the royal road or walks the evil path. He's someone who becomes the hero or the Demon King...

Sofy knitted her shapely brows. She felt like it was described as such when she summarized the parts which she understood, but she could not grasp the meaning very good. Still, they were contents which gave an ominous impression.

—There are things with unclear meanings. Like the Goddess or the numbers 3 and 7 written on the front and back... What is bothering me are the words “inhuman things”.

Inhuman things. Torbalan was without a doubt that.

After pondering for a while about the King of the Magic Bullet, Sofy shook her head with a surprised face. What she was investigating now was about demons.

—I'm also concerned with the King of the Magic Bullet, but let's postpone this for another time.

If she was derailed, time would not be enough no matter how much there was. Sofy heaved a sigh and once again looked over the book.

Chapter 3 – The Witch

That decayed shrine was at a distance of about one day on horseback from the Imperial Palace.

Cracks ran on the walls as well as the pillars, and one part was covered with a deep black moss. The ornament did not retain its original form as it was shaved by the wind and rain, and one did not know what was enshrined in the temple. The exit door and entrance were lost and a square hole opened gaping wide.

It was a building in which ghosts were likely the kinds to inhabit rather than bandits.

It greatly deviated from the main road and there were neither villages nor towns nearby. Or, although there might have been some before, they might have died out for some kind of reason.

A girl was visiting that run-down shrine to which probably not even one person would approach.

The girl was riding a horse. She covered her bright red hair and her eyes of different colors with a hat and put on an overcoat on top of her purple dress. There was a whip bundled in a circle to the waist of the dress.

It was the “Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl” Elizavetta.

“It seems to be without a doubt here.”

As she looked up at the run-down shrine and muttered, Elizavetta got off her horse. She tightly grasped the black whip in her left hand and, showing no signs of fear, entered the run-down shrine. The cold stagnant air in the building stroked her cheeks.

The black whip which she was grasping in her left hand was tinged with a white light and blew off a part of the darkness. Elizavetta suddenly turned her gaze to her right hand. So far, she felt nothing in particular.

Elizavetta circularly turned the light emitting black whip and checked the state of the surroundings. As expected, the inside of the decayed shrine had begun to fall apart just like the outside. Debris rolled all over on the narrow passage that was full of cracks.

Elizavetta silently advanced through the passage and immediately came out to an opened place. In the back of the space likely to hold 20 to 30 people, a stone statue of a small-sized old woman was put there alone.

“Baba Yaga!”

As she sharply glared at the stone statue, Elizavetta shouted in a voice so loud that the run-down shrine shook.

“Come out, Baba Yaga!”

But, there was no one who responded to the red-haired Vanadis’ voice. As the echo of the thundering cry melted and disappeared in the atmosphere, Elizavetta approached the stone statue with long strides. She brandished the black whip. The atmosphere howled and the statue was smashed to pieces and fell with a hard sound of destruction.

Elizavetta set up the black whip again, and ran a cautious look around. However, contrary to her expectation, a time of about 100 counts flowed without even one sound occurring.

Elizavetta silently turned around. She turned her back on the wreckage of the statue and left the run-down shrine.

"The act of a lunatic, eh..."

She entered into a shrine which was probably uninhabited for dozens of years, cried, and destroyed only the statue and came out. Elizavetta herself thought that if she asked others, they would look puzzled.

However, it was certain that she did not come up with another method.

In the run-down shrine which she visited with Urz, Baba Yaga had taken the form of a statue. Or, she appeared in that place through the statue.

As for Elizavetta, other than calling out to the statues of Baba Yaga in Lebus and destroying them to provoke her, she wasn't able to think of a method to drag her out. Even if she consulted with someone, or had the scholars of Lebus carried out a detailed investigation, it would take too much time.

As she rounded the black whip and put it back onto her waist, Elizavetta stared at her left hand.

She was originally right-handed. She had practiced so that she could wield her Viralt even with her left hand in preparation for when push comes to shove. However compared with her right hand, she remained uneasy after all; of whether in a fight against a demon, she would be able to wield the Thunder Swirl as she wanted.

—I have no choice, but to do it.

When she persuaded herself like so, Elizavetta straddled the horse which was quietly waiting in front of the shrine. She grasped the reins and made the horse run as she kicked its belly.

She knew the nine other locations of run-down temples which enshrined Baba Yaga. She would think about whether or not this way of doing things was meaningless after visiting them. She must act first.

On the desolate ground, only the sound of hooves could be heard.



It was seven days later after Lim and company met Urz that a letter arrived to Elen who was in LeitMeritz. Considering the distance from the castle town of Lebus to LeitMeritz's Imperial Palace, it might be said that it was an astounding speed.

Elen was processing government affairs in her office, but she looked at the letter she received and knitted her brows.

"From Legnica...?"

The seal stamped on the letter was without a doubt Legnica's. Although feeling suspicious, Elen broke the seal with careful hands. She quickly looked over the letter.

The letter was written with Limalisha's handwriting. She seemed to have sent it to Legnica using a company from Lebus' castle town, which was then carried to LeitMeritz.

When her red pupils shone while she was reading it, and then after she finished, Elen strongly grasped the letter as she was overcome with emotion.

"What a relief..."

She muttered these words from the bottom of her heart. The inside of her chest was filled with warm feelings and tears blurred on her eyes. The silver-haired Vanadis muttered "what a relief" once again.

"So it was Tigre after all."

After having sent out Lim and company, Elen had tried not to think about it.

This was because when she was reminded of Tigre's face, she ended up remembering Urz who was beside Elizavetta and she felt depressed, but she felt that it was probably all right if she entrusted it to Lim and Mashas.

"However, so his memory hasn't returned yet..."

Elen leaned on the back of her chair and looked up at the ceiling. Even she did not know of a way of returning his memory. Elen wandered her look, and looked at the long sword leaned against the wall.

"Arifal. Do you know?"

The Silver Flash put on its sheath calmly responded to his master by sending wind. Elen revealed a soft expression and smiled wryly.

"You don't know, huh. No, I ask a strange thing."

When she said that, Elen vigorously stood up from the chair. While grabbing the Silver Flash, she called a civil official by ringing the bell on her desk.

To the civil official who showed up, Elen said with a smile she had not showed in a while.

"I will leave for a while. In the meantime, I leave this place in your care."

"Did something happen?"

While being overawed by Elen's bright smile which had not been seen recently, the civil official asked.

"Limalisha who headed to Lebus found Earl Vorn. He is this LeitMeritz's guest General. I will go and bring him back."

A voice of admiration leaked from the civil official's mouth. It's not as if he was holding that much good will towards Tigre, but he was fully aware of the importance of being entrusted with another country's guest General.

“Does that mean that Earl Vorn is kept in Lebus?”

“No. It’s just that he lost his memory in an accident, and is freeloading in Lebus as they took a liking to him.”

Although more than freeloading, he was actually the Vanadis’ adviser, Elen said that in order to explain so that it was easy to understand.

“Do you need soldiers?”

The civil official asked in a tone as to confirm. Elen shook her head.

“It isn’t as if I will start a war. I alone am enough.”

“At least, take someone to accompany you...”

“Your worrying is natural, but I have this guy.”

Saying so, Elen lightly tapped the sheath of the long sword which she held in her hand.

“I know that I’m putting you in trouble, but please.”

The civil official, seeming to have given up, respectfully bowed. But, he must’ve understood when he was told this matter.

On that day, Elen left the Imperial Palace.



In a deep pot put on a fire, fish soup let white steam rise. It was a recipe where one put plenty of water in a pot along with finely cut fish and vegetables and cooked them together.

Today’s ingredients were salmon pickling in salt, potatoes and turnip that they were supplied. Aside from the fish soup, the meal consisted of rye bread and one cup of vodka.

Lim who received the fish soup served in a bowl said in an unusual tone.

“In Lebus, potatoes and turnips are cylindrically cut long and slender.”

“Speaking of which, they are cut more roughly in LeitMeritz.”

While eating the fish soup similarly served in a plate, Mashas responded. It was a dish which was eaten everywhere in Zhcted, but how it was made seemed to be subtly different from region to region.

—*So that’s it.*

While looking at the fish soup in the deep pot, Urz consented without uttering his voice. He thought that he had seen a fish soup different from this somewhere. He had probably eaten a fish soup somewhere in Zhcted that was not Lebus before losing his memory.

Looking around the surroundings, deep pots were put on fires here and there and were letting white steam rise. Sounds of soldiers' friendly chats could also be heard here and there.

While the sun set at the west end, several stars were already beginning to twinkle in the sky which had gradually darkened. The air increased its coldness and everyone firmly wore their overcoats.

It was several days ago that Urz, Lim, Mashas and the 100 Lebus cavalrymen had arrived at a run-down shrine. Urz and company had built a camp near the run-down shrine and spent the day while waiting for Elizavetta who might visit it sooner or later.

The trio of Urz, Lim, and Mashas sitting around a pot of fish soup was in a meaning a natural course of events. Urz was the commander after all, and Lim and Mashas were, so to say, Guests Generals. Urz had to keep them company.

Lim, a person of LeitMeritz, and Mashas, a person from Brune, were turned looks of doubt and caution by the soldiers on the first day, but at least concerning Mashas, he has quite opened up with the Lebus soldiers.

When the trio was eating, one of the Lebus soldiers walked to Urz and company. It was a young soldier around 20 years old. A stubbly beard began to be conspicuous around his chin.

"Earl Rodant. May we count on you tonight, too?"

"Yes. I'll go after eating this, so gather those who want to hear."

While putting the salmon in the fish soup into his mouth, the old Earl calmly answered. The young soldier revealed a joyful smile, bowed to Mashas and Urz, and walked away.

—He's more popular than me to the soldiers, eh.

While looking at the old Earl's face in profile, the youth thought such a thing. It was neither jealousy nor prejudice; Urz genuinely admired the old Earl.

The reason why Mashas had opened up with the Lebus soldiers was that he gathered them every night and he told various stories.

There were times when Urz had also blended in with soldiers and heard them, but there was no end to the topics, such as stories of other countries like Brune and Sachstein. Stories of delicious meals and alcohol, stories of journeys, an old legend of a hero heard from a certain minstrel, stories of ghosts haunting mansions which became abandoned buildings and the like, that this old Earl offered.

Although it couldn't be helped, there were many parts in Naum's order this time that the soldiers could not understand. They had headed towards a similarly run-down shrine far away from the main road and waited for the Vanadis there.

It wouldn't matter even if he didn't have to tell about why the Vanadis was visiting run-down shrines one after another. Even they understood that the commander's intention didn't have to be conveyed in detail to a simple soldier. Above all, the soldiers respected and swore allegiance to Elizavetta.

But, it was extremely boring just to look at a run-down shabby house-like old shrine in a wintry place far away from villages and towns all day long.

Hence, stories told by Mashas became a valuable pleasure for the soldiers. In a sense, this old Earl became more familiar with the Lebus soldiers than Urz.

“Earl Rodant, thank you.”

Urz deeply bowed to Mashas. Although Urz had achievements, partly because his life in Lebus was short, it was hard to say whether he gained popularity with the soldiers. It was without a doubt thanks to Mashas’ art of conversation that the soldiers’ morale was maintained.

“What, it’s not that big a deal. Besides, I’ve also heard various stories from them.”

While putting the rye bread into the fish soup and eating, Mashas laughed and said.

“Now then, I wonder what kind of story I will tell tonight. Shall I tell about a small bear which changed itself into a girl in order to return the favor of having been saved by a hunter?”

“Lord Mashas. Could you also let me hear that story?”

Having showed a quick reaction to the old Earl’s mutter was Lim. Urz stared at her with a face saying that it was unexpected.

“Are you interested in bears?”

As he asked so, Lim was first surprised and then revealed a lonely smile. However, those changes were only for an instant; she immediately returned to her unamiable expression.

“Yes, a little.”

Urz inwardly reflected on whether he had asked something bad. I should apologize later when no one is looking.

Since they left the castle town, Lim almost never changed her unamiable expression; she did not speak that much. She didn’t try to associate with the Lebus soldiers and was for the most part next to Mashas, to the point that there were many soldiers who mistook her for being the old Earl’s attendant.

However, Lim was watching (observing) this unit well. She, who noticed that the formation was disordered during the march, immediately told Urz about it. Besides, about the decision in changing the formation of soldiers or building camps, Lim gave various advices in a modest attitude.

She was the only woman there, so she should have hardships because of that, but she did not emit even one complaint or dissatisfaction.

Lim was considerate of Urz. She left the familiarization with the Lebus soldiers to Mashas, and she herself, put her heart and soul into the duty of supporting the youth; in an inconspicuous way.

Though Urz was friendly to her from the start, he thought that he was really thankful for her presence in these past several days.

—However, I wonder where master is now...

While nibbling the bread, Urz suddenly looked far away into the distance. On the other side of the many barracks that were lined up, the decayed shrine soared.

Urz thought that Baba Yaga also seemed to be interested in him, but her current aim was probably Elizavetta. This was because if that demon was aiming for him, there should've been many opportunities when he was taking that short trip with Damad.

He wondered whether he should have also borrowed only a horse, and visited the run-down shrines without being entrusted with soldiers by Naum, but even if he, who wasn't familiar with the land, did such a thing, he would only lose his way in vain.

He persuaded himself to not get impatient. Now, being here should be the best choice.

—Please, be safe.

While Urz inwardly wished so, the sky calmly increased its darkness.

At this point in time, there was something that nobody noticed including Urz.

It was that the place where they were at and the place of the run-down shrine shown on the map were out of alignment.

But, this was not their fault.

Naum and Lazarl had overlooked a certain thing. Both of them did not think about whether or not there was similarly a run-down shrine, which enshrined Baba Yaga, near the indicated places.

Lazarl who was requested by Elizavetta took about one day to check the run-down shrines of ten places. Then the red-haired Vanadis wanted to act asap when she finds out about the ten places she became scared that her retainers would be being controlled.

Of course, Lazarl also continued investigating about the places of other run-down shrines.

But, as he was preoccupied with Elizavetta having disappeared and then Urz's return, he forgot about them.

Even so, if the locations of the run-down shrines were a little easier to find, then Urz and the others would not have made a mistake, either. However, all these run-down shrines were greatly detached from the main road, and they were hard to find even if looking at the map.

In addition, Naum's instructions were as followed.

"Each unit shall proceed to a different run-down shrine and be on standby until Vanadis-sama shows up. And if they find Vanadis-sama, they should bring her back to the Imperial Palace at once."

The place, where Urz and company were at, was about five Belsta (about 5 Km) away from the target: a run-down shrine.



The bonfire was burning.

Branches which were stabbing potatoes were standing near it. The number of potatoes was three.

"I like the boiled ones more though. I wasn't able to prepare a pan, so it can't be helped. Besides, directly burning it in this way is also rather interesting."

The girl who was sitting nearby happily said while looking at the potatoes. Elizavetta slightly moved her head and looked at the profile of the girl next to her.

She was around 10 years old same as her. It was a girl with long silver hair and impressive red pupils which shone, brimming with vitality. Although her hands and feet which extended from her blue dress were thin like hers (Elizavetta's), they had the sturdiness and flexibility peculiar to a child.

By the way, it was this girl who brought the potatoes. She said that she had secretly filched them from a master chief. Elizavetta asked wonderingly.

"Is it interesting? The potatoes?"

"It seems that you can make them either burnt or not. Which means that you can enjoy various flavors."

The silver-haired girl answered so and laughed; and Elizavetta going with the flow also smile.

It was just yesterday that Elizavetta met this girl.

Elizavetta was helped by her as she was bullied as usual by the children of the village. It was a place in the back of some house where people didn't come by that much. Pure white snow covered the ground, piled up on the roofs of houses and covered the trees around the village.

"You guys! Aren't you ashamed of ganging up on only one person?!"

The number of children who were bullying her at that time was four. There were also children with bodies bigger than the girl's. However, the silver-haired girl, not even showing any signs of fear and with her arms folded, proudly glared at the children. The children frowned first and then scornfully laughed.

"It has nothing to do with you. A stranger shouldn't poke her nose into it."

Then, the silver-haired girl briskly walked in their direction. She looked up at the child with the biggest body and beat his face.

Anyone who was there was dumfounded; Elizavetta, too. Speaking of the silver-haired girl, she glared at the children with a nasty smile.

"Even with this, will you still say that it has nothing to do with me?"

The hit child's face turned red (in anger) and he attacked the girl. The other children surrounded the girl so as to not let her escape.

Elizavetta, with her posture of being crouch down on the ground still could only watch that scene. There was also the fact that her whole body which was hit and kicked was hurting, but she was too scared to break in and wasn't able to do it.

That quarrel showed a one-sided development as the girl utterly beaten up the children of the village.

It's not that the village's children were weak. They, who had helped with farm work since they were children, had enough physical strength and stamina. They also often quarreled between themselves.

But, the girl was more used to fighting than them. The way she moved her body was different. She watched well with not only the opponent's movements, but also her surroundings.

As she focused her aim at the one who seemed to be the weakest among the four children, she quickly attacked him and kicked a vital part. She slipped through the side of that child who crouched down holding his crotch, came out of the encirclement and beat them in turn one by one. She thoroughly attacked only vital parts such as the head or the feet.

"We'll get you for this...!"

When the children left that place while cursing and bearing tears, only the girl and Elizavetta remained there.

In those days, Elizavetta looked at that girl with eyes wide opened.

It was an unbelievable scene. Elizavetta who was bullied by them since she was small had naturally believed firmly that the village's children were strong. She had also never thought that there was someone, a child like her and a girl at that, who could beat them.

"Can you stand?"

The girl held out her hand to Elizavetta with a smile. Although Elizavetta shook her shoulders as she was startled, she timidly took the girl's hand. That hand was warm.

"You've quite an awful face. It's swollen, so it's better to cool it."

The girl said with a shocked face, and Elizavetta scooped up snow that was underfoot and pushed it against her face. The snowy feeling felt good on her face which was tinged with heat.

The girl introduced herself as Eleonora.

"Just call me Elen."

To the girl who said so with a smile, Elizavetta mumblingly moved her mouth and told her name, too.

By the way, at this time, Elizavetta was still wearing an eye patch on her right eye. It was to hide her Rainbow Eyes. She did so thinking that she would be bullied because of her eyes of different colors, but in front of the villagers who knew from the start that she had Rainbow Eyes, it was meaningless.

"I'm a member of a mercenary group. Though I say that, I'm something like a subordinate worker (servant) though." About the first half of that line (her words), Elizavetta had already expected it. If there were unfamiliar faces currently in this small poor village, they could only be those of the mercenary group named "Silver Gale", which had arrived at the village yesterday. But, it didn't even occur to her that there was such a child in it.

"Does even a child like you get used to being a mercenary?"

Elizavetta asked so out of curiosity. The mercenary group "Silver Gale" consisted of about 40 people. There were more than 30 male combatants and the remaining people were those like cooks, blacksmiths and young women. There were no children other than Elen.

"I don't know."

Elen plainly answered Elizavetta's question.

"By the leader's story, he said that he picked me up, a baby on a battlefield. I don't know why he intended to raise me, but since then I been in the mercenary group. The leaders had never seen a child of my age being employed."

Elizavetta was listening to Elen's story with eyes wide opened. It was the story of an unknown world. And, she somehow understood why Elen was strong in fighting, too. If you surrounded by such ruffians every day, you would become sturdy whether you like it or not.

"By the way, why were you bullied?"

Being asked by Elen, Elizavetta once again faltered.

She did not want to speak about her Rainbow Eyes. That's why she lied that her right eye was inconvenient, and added that she was an abandoned child who did not know her parents.

Elen did not doubt Elizavetta's words and greatly nodded.

"I see. But, it's not a reason to stay quiet and being bullied. How about revenge?"

Elizavetta's face turned pale and she intensely shook her head. She thought in her mind that she was an outsider after all. She might not be able to stay in this village if she did something like that.

"I'm not saying to go as far as beating them up. But, if you keep on being beaten, the other party will only grow arrogant. You also have fists, kicks and I will teach you that there are teeth to bite with."

Elizavetta dropped the snow she had onto the ground and touched her cheeks. The pain had not yet gone away; not only her cheeks, but also her arms, sides, back and thighs.

The figure of Elen having beaten up the village's children earlier flashed across her mind.

"Can I do it...?"

That scene smashed into pieces the belief which Elizavetta had held for a long time.

She thought that it was only the adults of the village that the village's children were no match for.

Especially, the child with the big body who bullied her proactively. She had never imagined that he, of all people, would be beaten by a girl.

"You can do it."

Elen nodded with a smile.

"We're going to be in this village for another three or four days, when I have time, I'll come. I'll teach you as much as I know about fighting."

During the four days from that day, the mercenary group "Silver Gale" stayed in the village. According to Elen, they were employed by a noble in order to subdue bandits who were in the vicinity.

"It looks like the feudal lord here fought other nobles and flashily lost against them and now he is short on troops to fight bandits. That's why he employed a mercenary group like us."

It was common knowledge that mercenaries were also the same as bandits. It was not necessarily prejudice. This was because in order to get food and fuel, mercenary groups who attacked the village which they were supposed to originally protect and threatened small towns by force certainly existed.

Thinking based on that, the "Silver Gale" was a comparatively decent mercenary group. Except Elen's case, the mercenaries did not turn their hands to the people of the village. They properly negotiated even when they invited women and also paid their bills.

Although they received the pay, the hardships of the village which offered bed and food to 40 people was considerable, but they bought food from the neighboring villages and towns and somehow got over it.

By the way about Elen fighting, the children of the village did not complain, so it was left unsettled as such. It seemed that Elen herself received a fist from the mercenary group's leader.

Anyway for four days, Elizavetta was taught how to fight by Elen. It was for only four days, and there was little time in the intervals between works, too. Many chores such as drawing water, laundry, and mending of clothes were forced on Elizavetta who was treated and reared as an abandoned child.

Therefore, Elen thoroughly taught her the basic ways of moving her body and also to watch her surroundings.

“Remember. Even after I leave, find free time and do it every day. These four days are so that you remember to continue doing this every day from now on.”

“If I continue this every day, will I become strong?”

“It won’t be possible in ten days or around the corner [\[a\]](#). One or two months... Can you do it?”

Elizavetta nodded. The silver-haired girl’s teachings were severe, but Elizavetta whipped her tired body and desperately followed them. Of course, there was the desire to overcome her present condition, but more than that, she wanted to get closer to that figure of Elen of that day.

“In your case, it may be better to first think that you won’t lose. I was taught that the feeling of winning is important, so I mustn’t throw it away, but...”

“Yes. --I won’t lose.”

Four days passed in the blink of an eye.

The morning of that day, when Elizavetta went to Elen to say goodbye, there was nobody there. The “Silver Gale” had already left the village.

Elizavetta dropped her shoulders for having been unable to say goodbye. Then, she softly touched the eye patch on her right eye.

—I also wasn’t able to tell her about this...

Elizavetta hid to Elen until the end that she had Rainbow Eyes. Although she mustered her courage and tried to tell her several times, four days were too short for a ten-year-old girl to strengthen her determination.

On that day, the bullying towards Elizavetta was restarted.

Just like before, she was one-sidedly hit, kicked and fell in the snow, but she did not despair. *Hasn’t Elen also said it? That it won’t be possible in ten days or around the corner.*

—One month. You’ll show them in one month.

The girl who had given up on everything before meeting Elen was no longer there. Even if she was scorned for being an abandoned child who did not know her parents, and her Rainbow Eyes were hated, she had stopped minding it that much.

The children weren’t opponents that she would never match. It was painful when she was hit, but there was no need to be randomly afraid.

Perhaps because composure was born in her heart, her outlook had also widened.

The adults of the village tolerated the bullying of Elizavetta and might occasionally even take part in it, but if the bullying became too cruel, interference would always arise. Elizavetta came to think that there was some kind of reason for that.

It was three months later that she found the reason. One man had visited Elizavetta.

At that time, Elizavetta had reached the point where she was now able to mercilessly counterattack the children. It was not just revenge for having been bullied. She grew up until she could escape if necessary, sometimes ruin the other party's work, and invite discord by calmly telling a lie, and she was regarded as a problem in the village.

The man who visited Elizavetta told her this.

"Your father is calling for you."

At this time, Elizavetta got to know that she was the illegitimate child of a certain noble. The adults of the village were holding back the degree of bullying because they knew that.

Then, she also knew why she, who was the illegitimate child of a noble, was treated as an abandoned child without parents and bullied. The man called Rodion Abt who was Elizavetta's father, because his daughter was born with Rainbow Eyes, properly chose a village in his territory and pushed her into it.

However, Rodion's heir had died from an illness. He couldn't help but decide to take in Elizavetta, his daughter.

Elizavetta began a new life as the daughter of an aristocrat.

After having parted with that poor village, it was five years later that Elizavetta met Elen again. Elizavetta was 15 years old. And Elen was 14 years old then. The two girls met each other as Vanadis.

Elizavetta immediately remembered Elen. But, the silver-haired Vanadis didn't seem to realize that Elizavetta was the child of that time.

Elizavetta thought that it was no wonder since she hid her Rainbow Eyes. Besides, neither 'Eleonora' nor 'Elizavetta' were names that were that rare for women's names.

LeitMeritz and Lebus were distant, so there were few opportunities for interactions. While she thought that she would someday talk with Elen while carrying out her duty as a Vanadis, cracks which couldn't be restored occurred between the two girls.



In front of her, fire vacantly flickered. Elizavetta startled raised her face.

Before she knew it she had fallen asleep. There was a bonfire in front of her, and a branch which had a potato stabbed onto it was standing near it.

The potato was something which she had just bought in the village she stopped by at one koku before.

"I had a quite nostalgic dream..."

Did fatigue called for sleep and the bonfire and potatoes awaken her past memory?

Suddenly, a burnt-like smell assailed Elizavetta's nose. The red-haired Vanadis who noticed it hurriedly took the branch that had the potato on it. She unintentionally dropped it due to the burning heat and the potato rolled on the ground.

The part that was burnt black looked upward as if to blame Elizavetta.

Elizavetta sighed and picked up the potato over her overcoat. She removed the dirt, chipped off the burnt part with the hem of her overcoat and bit into it without hesitating.

It was a deserted field path vastly away from the main road. Dry grass covered most of the ground, but the soil was exposed here and there. A forest could be seen in the distance, but not even one tree had grown in this area. The sky was dyed red and the sun was hidden beyond the clouds.

Twelve days had passed since she left the Imperial Palace. Elizavetta had already visited the places of nine run-down shrines and destroyed all the statues of Baba Yaga.

However, the demon did not show up at all.

Although she had many times encountered the units of Lebus soldiers, which Naum had dispatched, along the way. She, who persuaded them, high-handedly ordered them to withdraw, or sometimes pretended to abide and ran away, continued her trip.

The shock that was given to her due to the matter of losing 15 knights was great. Elizavetta intended to act alone until she brought down Baba Yaga.

Also when she stopped by a village some time ago, she bought only the necessary food and fuel, and immediately left the village. Until today, she didn't borrow a vacant room in a town or village and intentionally spent her nights outdoors. When thinking that they might be manipulated by Baba Yaga, Elizavetta was able to bear it.

—The run-down shrine where I'll head to after this is the last...

If the Baba Yaga did not appear there too, then she would have no choice but to go back to the Imperial Palace. This was because aside from the ten locations given to her by Lazarl, she did not know another location of run-down shrine where to head after this.

Why didn't that demon show up? Was this way of doing things meaningless?

"I'll think about it after going to the last run-down shrine."

As she finished eating the potato, Elizavetta took some dirt and put out the bonfire. Fatigue from the trip and impatience blurred on her eyes of different colors. Her mind and body were exhausted by the tension which continued incessantly and the days of sleeping outdoors.

Putting the saddle on her horse which she had let rest, Elizavetta got on horseback.

Heading towards the tenth location of the run-down shrine, the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl rode her horse.

A desolate land was spread around that run-down shrine. What were reflected in her field vision except the decayed building were only gray grit and a little slush. The sun was nowhere to be found in the lead-colored sky, but evening should have been imminent.

Elizavetta, who got off the horse, looked up at the run-down shrine with an annoyed expression. Its appearance was hardly different from the ones she had seen so far. The walls and pillars were finely damaged and cracks were running everywhere. The plaster came loose and fell and some rubble were sticking on the surface of the wall.

Elizavetta grasped Valitsaif in her left hand and walked right until the run-down shrine. As expected there was no door, and what looked like a hinge shook to the wind as it was stuck in the edge of the entrance which opened gaping wide in the front.

The red-haired Vanadis shouted towards the abyss where light did not reach.

“Baba Yaga! If you hear me, come out!”

Before the echo of her angry voice disappeared, a tepid wind flowed from the depths of the darkness. Then, an old woman’s hoarse voice reached Elizavetta’s ears.

“—Don’t utter such a loud voice. What will you do if this collapses?”

Elizavetta opened her eyes wide and quickly leapt back from there. Her golden and blue eyes were filled with anger and fighting spirit, and power accumulated in her hand grasping her Viralt. The black whip was tinged with light from the handle to its tip.

A small-sized old woman appeared from within the darkness dragging a broom. She wore a black robe that was bigger than her body and put on a hood that was the same color over her eyes. Only a long hooked nose peeped out from the hood and a breathtaking ominous miasma was released from her whole body.

“You really went and broke nine statues that serves to worship and revere me. “Whip”, you need a little punishment—”

The demon did not speak her lines to the end as they were blown away by a storm swept sideways. Elizavetta wielded her Viralt at the same time she treaded on. The black whip clad in lightning drew a sharp arc in the space and attacked Baba Yaga.

The old demon woman didn’t even try to avoid it. Valitsaif passed from the left to the right while tearing up her black robe. At that moment, the robe became a piece of cloth, greatly extended blocking Elizavetta’s field of vision.

The red-haired Vanadis who felt danger retreated while pulling back the (her) whip. Then, something collided with her back. Although wrapped in shock and shivers, Elizavetta struck the black whip behind her and rolled on the ground. She quickly rose and looked at what she had collided with.

Four children who wrapped their bodies in shabby clothes were standing there. Elizavetta was familiar with their faces. They were the children who bullied her when she was a child.

—What is the meaning of this...?

To Elizavetta who stared at them with an astonished expression, the children revealed uncanny grins and opened their mouths.

“Why is someone as disgusting as you doing in this village?”

“With your eye colors different on the right and left, aren’t you a monster’s child?”

“You monster. We’ll teach you a lesson!”

The red-haired Vanadis’ face was distorted in anger. These were words which she was told almost every day a long time ago.

—To use such repulsive means...

The children kicked the floor and attacked Elizavetta.

They were without doubt illusions created by the demon. But, even if she understood that, a suitable mental attitude was necessary to wield the black whip.

“Disappear!”

With a war cry, she brandished her Viralt. The children, still revealing sadistic smiles, were bisected right in half from around the waist. However, not a drop of blood flowed out from the cut trunks. No shock was transmitted also to Elizavetta’s left hand grasping the Thunder Swirl.

Their corpses rapidly faded and disappeared as they melted into the atmosphere.

“—Hey”

A voice came from behind. Reflected on the eyes of Elizavetta who looked back was a girl around ten years old with silver hair and ruby-colored pupils.

—Elen...!?

It was unmistakably the Elen that she had met when she was small. Hiding her left hand on her back and revealing the bright smile of that time, Elen stared at Elizavetta.

“Why is someone as disgusting as you doing in this village?”

The completely same words as what a child of the village had said earlier flew out from Elen’s mouth. To Elizavetta who was at a loss for words and stood stock still, Elen repeated word by word the abuse that the children spoke of. Without changing one bit her smile.

“You are also... an illusion, right?!”

Elizavetta openly spitted out her anger. She raised the Thunder Swirl and struck the girl. However, her movements were dull, and slightly awkward.

The girl lightly leapt back and dodged the powerful and violent blow. A black whirlwind clad in lightning gouged the ground and the earth and sand mixed with grit was blown off.

"That's quite a tremendous power. All right, I'll give you this as a reward."

Smiling at Elizavetta who was breathing heavily, Elen casually threw what she was holding in her hand that was hidden behind her back to the front.

It, which rolled on the ground, was a freshly severed head smeared with blood and mud. The red-haired Vanadis' face turned pale.

This was because that severed head was her father's, Rodion Abt. He was a man who committed many crimes two years ago and was killed by Elen.

As Elizavetta didn't take her eyes off it, the mouth of the severed head moved and emitted a groan-like voice.

"Why didn't you help me?"

At that time, Elizavetta tried to help her father. However, Rodion escaped without listening to his daughter's words. The severed head spanned further words.

"Why don't you take revenge on the Vanadis who killed me?"

After Rodion was killed, Elizavetta challenged Elen to a duel. But, Elizavetta, being not a match for her at all, was defeated and left.

The severed head indifferently repeated reproaches. These words became an immaterial poison that entered Elizavetta's ears and slashed at her heart many times.

--Shut up!"

While shouting, Elizavetta firmly closed her eyes and turned her face away. The black whip drew a small arc in the atmosphere and smashed the severed head. In order to wield her Viralt, she must eagerly muster willpower.

Elizavetta raised her face without so much as fixing her disturbed breathing. Before she knew it, countless bodies were rolling around. Each body had countless swelling things all over and the skin turned strangely black. There were traces of blood around the nails and there were no bodies' faces which did not have an anguished expression.

"Why didn't you help me?"

One of the bodies blamed Elizavetta. Then, the other bodies emitted words one after another blaming the red-haired Vanadis. They were people who suffered from a plague and died. They were people whom Elizavetta was not able to save.

-I mustn't listen to them.

Elizavetta tore her eyes off from the bodies and looked to the front.

She greatly opened her eyes wide. Elen stood there. Not the Elen when she was child, but the present Elen. The silver-haired Vanadis who was dressed in blue clothes and hung a long sword to her waist was staring at Elizavetta.

"Did you enjoy it, "Whip"?"

The old woman's hoarse voice resounded and Elen's face was distorted. As it swelled to the extent that the left eye made up half of the face, the eyeball fell. Elizavetta was about to leak a scream to that disgusting scene.

From the hollow eye socket, a sticky black fluid-like thing flowed out. When the black fluid covered Elen's face, it formed the face of the old woman who revealed a damp and shady smile.

Although Elizavetta unintentionally raised the Thunder Swirl, she desisted from swinging it just before she did. She stopped her movements with that posture.

—Calm down. This is also an illusion.

While gazing at that ugly thing which had the old woman's face and Elen's body, Elizavetta persuaded herself so. Even if she crushed this, it would either melt and disappear like the illusions so far or only change into something different.

"Valitsaif..."

Fixing her breathing, Elizavetta called out to her Viralt. In response to its master's call, white lighting repeatedly flashed many times on the tip of the black whip's handle.

Each time the Thunder Swirl made a flash, several dozens, hundreds of particles of light, as small as sand, were released into the atmosphere. It was a feeble thunder stroke of the degree to only feel itchy even if you touched it, but Elizavetta's purpose was not to attack.

The swarm of thunder strokes calmly advanced around the area and one of them caught the demon's presence. It was not the fake Elen standing in front, but it was on Elizavetta's right side. About ten steps away. Although nothing was found there, Elizavetta swung down the Thunder Swirl in that direction without hesitation.

"--Slash and brush aside the dark night, ephemeral fang (Nott Rubeed)!"

With a roaring sound harking back to thunder, intense light surged from the tip of the black whip. Light ran through the space at the speed of lightning and pierced through the thing which was lurking. A clear response was transmitted to Elizavetta's left hand through the Viralt.

The next moment, the fake Elen also rolled to the ground, melted and disappeared into the atmosphere.

Then, an old woman wearing a black robe appeared at the place where Elizavetta let out her Veda. She let her hooked nose peep out and trailed a shabby broom. It was Baba Yaga.

"I was wondering how far you would dance, but well it's to this extent, I guess."

At the back of the hood, the demon leaked out a muffled laughter. Elizavetta sneered and glared at Baba Yaga.

“You’re quite composed. Do you still have any tricks?”

“That’s right. For example, I’ve also got such a trick.”

As the demon responded in a tone filled with composure, she set up her broom with both her hands and recited something which seemed to be an incantation.

Soon after, a flame the size of a fist appeared at the tip of the broom held by the old woman. Elizavetta stared wide-eyed.

While flickering, the flame swelled up in the blink of an eye and became a fireball as big as an adult’s head. When Baba Yaga swung her broom once, the fireball fiercely ran through the air leaving a trail of flame and attacked Elizavetta.

—Is this also an illusion!?

The red-haired Vanadis clenched her teeth and mowed down the fireball with the Thunder Swirl.

However, perhaps because she swung with the left hand which she wasn’t used to, the Thunder Swirl’s movements were slightly off. At a distance closer than Elizavetta had thought, the black whip and the fireball clashed.

Scattering a roaring sound, with blasts and waves of heat into the atmosphere, the fireball was blown off into pieces. A heavy shock remained on her hand through the Viralt and the scattered sparks made small burns on Elizavetta’s skin.

—No. It’s not an illusion...

“Well defended. Then, how about this?”

As Baba Yaga happily laughed, she rotated the broom in her hands and turned its tip to Elizavetta. The broom was tinged with a white light.

“—Valitsaif!”

Elizavetta, who sensed danger, shouted. Her shouting and the white shining lightning surging from the tip of the broom were almost simultaneous. Golden lightning being also released from the black whip held by the Vanadis, the two thunder strokes clashed in the air while dazzlingly tearing apart the space.

The lights from two colors became entangled, boisterously danced and burned Elizavetta’s eyes. The roaring thunder shook the skin of the Vanadis of Rainbow Eyes. Although her skin was burned by the flying lightning particles, Elizavetta put strength into her feet and eagerly stayed put.

The atmosphere vigorously burst open and a shock wave attacked Elizavetta. The two thunder strokes, unable to crush each other, lost their power and vanished. Although her view was wrapped in white light for an instant, she gradually regained the original scenery.

—How should I fight?

Elizavetta couldn't help shivering.

She had fought against humans, beasts, dragons and even against a demon like Torbalan.

But, it was not Elizavetta who defeated Torbalan, but Sasha. If she had fought him alone, Elizavetta would have without a doubt lost.

And, Baba Yaga was completely different from Torbalan. She deceived humans, showed illusions and freely manipulated fire and lightning. She was a fearful witch like those coming out of an old tale.

She couldn't predict at all how she would attack.

In addition, she could not accurately fix her aim with her left hand after all. Though only a little, the whip was late and slightly off its trajectory. If the opponent was an ordinary human, it would be a gap of a negligible degree. But, with a monster like Baba Yaga as the opponent, it would certainly become fatal.

Watching Elizavetta standing stock still, Baba Yaga broadly laughed at the back of the hood worn over her eyes.

"What's wrong? If you don't come, I'll attack again."

When the old demon woman swung her broom from right to left, a sudden gust violently blew. While rolling up pebbles and a cloud of sand, the wind attacked Elizavetta. The red-haired Vanadis reflexively covered her face with her left hand.

—With such petty tricks!

While being stirred by the wind and staggering, Elizavetta raised her Viralt.

But, there was no sign of the demon in her field of vision. In the gap when she took her eyes off for just an instant, she disappeared.

"Above."

A hoarse laughter tickled Elizavetta's ears. The Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl reflexively swung her Viralt. Valitsaif pierced through the black shadow floating overhead.

However, there was no response, and the black shadow disappeared like fog melting before the red-haired Vanadis' eyes. At the same time, Elizavetta's legs were swept out by something. Her stance was broken.

As she unintentionally got down on a knee, the handle of the broom attacked her with a side blow. Without room to avoid it, when she felt heat on her cheek, Elizavetta was blown off and fell on the ground.

A fireball once again appeared at the tip of Baba Yaga's broom and was released towards Elizavetta. The red-haired Vanadis tried to avoid it by rolling on the ground, but her right hand suddenly became heavy like lead and an acute pain ran through. Without any other choice left, she swung the Thunder Swirl as she was still lying on the ground.

Although she avoided a direct hit, the fireball exploded at point-blank range. The blast sent Elizavetta flying. The heat wave burned her body and the shockwave tore up her dress.

Elizavetta fell on her back.

Her field of vision shook. An acute pain ran throughout her body. She tried to get up, but she could not muster any strength. Her voice did not come out, too. As for her right hand, it was so heavy that she couldn't move even one finger.

She thought that she didn't want to lose. But, she wasn't able to think of what she should do.

"I shall soon deliver the final blow."

Baba Yaga dragged the hem of her robe and approached Elizavetta. Elizavetta grasped her Viralt, but other than that, she could only frustratingly glare at the demon.

The old demon woman raised her broom. However, Baba Yaga did not immediately swing it down.

"Speaking of which, there is something I wanted to ask. --Where is the "Bow"?"

At the back of the hood, the demon's eyes were tinged with a suspicious white light. Elizavetta didn't know, but this was reason why Baba Yaga didn't show up before her until today.

This demon was looking for Urz while watching Elizavetta's movements. However, without being able to find Urz in the end, she decided to fight Elizavetta.

"...Do you think I would say it even if I knew?"

Elizavetta spitted out. Even before a premonition of death, only her pride was not shaken.

"In that case--"

When Baba Yaga was about to answer, the sound of something cutting the wind reached Elizavetta's ears. One arrow hit the demon's broom, which was flipped and fell on the ground.

The red-haired Vanadis stared at that arrow which fell before her eyes with a surprised face. This time, she could hear the roar of horses' hooves. It was approaching straight to this direction.

Tears blurred to Elizavetta's Rainbow Eyes.

That arrow was shot from a distance of 300 Alsins away.

Having shot that arrow was a darkish red-haired youth.

The youth's name was Urz.

Chapter 4 – The Winter End

It was about a half koku before Urz noticed the mistake. The cavalrymen sent for reconnaissance had reported that they had discovered a different run-down shrine. Furthermore, the squad who went to a nearby village to gather information had also heard a story of a young girl traveler having been sighted.

Urz who heard that had the camp removed at once and came running to this place with the soldiers. And as soon as he found the figures of Elizavetta and the demon, he shot an arrow right away to attract the demon's attention to him.

It was really by a hairbreadth.

"You guys stay on standby there!"

While shouting to the soldiers behind, Urz rode his horse. He took out a new arrow from the quiver hung to his saddle and nocked it. He shortened the distance of both sides to around 200 Alsins before drawing the bowstring.

On the other hand, Baba Yaga turned a wondering face to Urz.

"He is surely the "Bow". But, I don't feel its presence after all. He doesn't seem to be hiding it, either..."

Urz shot the second arrow. Baba Yaga knocked down that arrow, which was accurately aiming for her head, with one swing of her broom.

"It's just an ordinary arrow... I don't feel any power."

At the back of the hood worn over her eyes, the demon's eyes were tinged with a color of doubt.

"I shall check once, I guess."

As she muttered, Baba Yaga stepped back as she slid on the ground without changing her posture at all. She lifted her left hand that was half hidden in the hem of her robe and pointed at Elizavetta who was still lying down.

Suddenly, Elizavetta's right arm was pushed straight upwards. None other than the red-haired Vanadis herself stared wide-eyed to the fact that her right arm moved against her will. As she was dragged as such by her right arm, Elizavetta got up.

"Master!"

Urz raised a voice of joy and hurried to Elizavetta's side. To the youth's eyes, it looked like the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl had stood up by herself.

Urz was immediately made to understand that it was his misapprehension. Elizavetta turned her back to the demon and shifted Valitsaif which she was holding in her left hand to her right hand.

"Urz, dodge!"

At the same time that she shouted, she swung the black whip while greatly breaking her posture. The whip was not clad in lightning, but it scooped out the atmosphere and was about to drive a strong blow to Urz.

Urz, though surprised, promptly inclined his body on horseback. In the brief time he thought that something hot had grazed the area from his cheek to the ear, a dull sound resounded and the horse's head was blown off. Urz was completely bathed in the fresh blood that was mixed with pieces of meat that had scattered into the atmosphere.

The horse's body greatly inclined and the youth was thrown on the ground. Although he hit his back hard, Urz turned and immediately jumped up. He turned eyes of surprise to Elizavetta without so much as wiping the horse's blood which dyed his face red.

While strongly holding down her right hand grasping the black whip with her left hand, Elizavetta got up. Her red hair was disheveled, her breathing was rough and bitterness overflowed on her expression. Relief in her golden right eye and grief in her blue left eye, both looking at the youth, respectively were shaking.

"Master?"

"Run away, Urz..."

Elizavetta desperately squeezed out her voice. Her right hand brushed off her left hand and once again swung the Thunder Swirl. Urz, although surprised, rolled on the ground and barely dodged the black whip.

On the ground where the black whip had hit very hard, a distorted trace similar to a carriage's wheel was created. It was a destructive power enough to blow away a horse's neck which was as big as a human's trunk with one blow. If he had received it directly, Urz would have probably been turned into lumps of flesh in an instant.

While taking distance from Elizavetta, Urz looked around. He glared at the old woman with the black robe that was about ten steps away behind Elizavetta.

—So it's her doing.

That demon did something to Elizavetta. While fixing his breathing, Urz ran his look to the horse that was lying down at a distant place away. The beheaded horse dyed the ground dark red with blood overflowing from the cut section. About ten arrows that had scattered from the quiver had fallen around.

Without taking his eyes off Baba Yaga, Urz carefully approached the horse's body. In a loud voice, he asked to the old demon woman.

"What did you do to master?!"

"Oh dear. You're talking as if I did anything bad to this girl."

Urz and Baba Yaga were about ten Alsins (about ten meter) away from each other. It was a distance difficult to hear for a very ordinary volume of voice. Nevertheless, the old woman's hoarse voice which was not that loud reached Urz's ears.

"I only gave power to this girl."

"Power...?"

"That's right. If she feels like it, she could break iron armor with her bare hands and even turned a human into small pieces. Aside from being thankful, you have no reason to resent me."

Saying up to there, Baba Yaga cut her words for a moment. The demon's gaze separated from Urz and was turned to Lim, Mashas and the Lebus soldiers who were far away.

Although they were ordered to wait on standby and had stopped their advance for the time being, they again rode their horses after witnessing the abnormal situation.

"It's slightly difficult to play with their hearts, I guess."

Baba Yaga's magic which controlled the fifteen knights; to perform it, it was necessary for the target person to expose strong feelings. Because the knights at that time got drunk on alcohol and exposed their negative feelings towards Urz, she was able to control them without difficulty.

However, the Lebus soldiers heading towards their direction, while thinking that they must help their Vanadis, were perplexed over the strange situation. The magic would probably be incomplete on them. Besides, Baba Yaga wanted to concentrate on Urz and Elizavetta.

"—I guess, to fight an army, you need an army."

The old witch swiftly stroked the ground with her broom. A change occurred on the ground between Urz, and Lim and company.

As soil mixed with grit rose innumerably, it stretched to the height of about a human adult and began to take the forms of humans.

Lim and Mashas who were standing at the vanguard of the soldiers pulled the reins and stopped their horses as they were surprised. The Lebus soldiers also confusedly stopped their horses, and collided with their comrades to the sudden occurrence, many of them fell from their horses.

There were no faces on the dolls of clod and their heads were round. They were of a good, tall build, their bodies were smooth, and only by seeing them, they were like statues in the middle of production. But, the parts equivalent to joints such as shoulders, elbows, and knees were moving like those of a human's.

The clod dolls began to move slowly before them; the number about 100.

The Lebus soldiers unable to understand immediately what happened, were staring at the dolls of clod with dumbfounded faces. Their reason didn't catch up to the too much aberrant situation.

A certain soldier leaked out a wordless groan, another soldier repeated “what is happening?” as he asked no one in particular. There was also a soldier who recited the names of gods and desperately tried to suppress his agitation.

The soldiers’ confusion and panic were also transmitted to Lim and Mashas, who were standing at their vanguard. Time was necessary even for these two people to accept what was happening before their eyes as reality.

The distance with the clod dolls shortened. One of the soldiers couldn’t endure the strain and fear and screamed at last. That feeling was also transmitted to the other soldiers; like a ripple spreading on the surface of water.

The Lebus soldiers collapsed before the battle and it looked like “every man for himself”.

“Don’t be confused!”

A sharp scolding stuck the soldiers’ earlobes. Having cried out was Lim. Her expression which usually had no fragment of sociability was filled with steepness.

“Look carefully! Aren’t they just clods?! Is the Lebus army just a gathering of weak soldiers frightened by something of this level?! While being near your master, where did you put your pride as warriors?!”

It wasn’t as if those clod dolls weren’t frightening for Lim. If she had been the only one in this place, she would’ve probably turned her horse around and run away.

However, she held her ground. Her feelings towards Elen and Tigre, and the sense of responsibility which she herself had cultivated held down her fear.

Her scolding showed an effect. There was probably also the fact that Lim, who reservedly coped with everything till now, raised her voice. Moreover, while being a person of LeitMeritz and a woman, she was in front of these monsters whose identity was unknown.

The self-confidence and guts of the Lebus soldiers who went around battlefields following Elizavetta made them hold their ground.

Furthermore, Mashas called out to them in a loud voice.

“Speaking of which, I have seen these things in the far-off country of Sachstein! They’re certainly strange and showy, but it’s just a street performance! It’s dangerous to touch them, but if we stay at a distance, there is nothing to fear!”

While shaking his gray beard, Mashas showed his usual composure and said. His voice rode upon the winds and also reached the soldiers’ ears in the rear.

Even an old aristocrat of a foreign country remained calm. The Lebus soldiers also pulled themselves together.

“Deploy to the right and left!”

Seeing that their morale was restored, Lim shouted. The commanding officer who heard it gave the order to the soldiers. The Lebus cavalrymen reformed their ranks and set their spears while surrounding the clod dolls at a distance.

“Don’t close in for an attack immediately! Now, we should just attract the enemy’s attention to here!”

Lim shouted so for precaution. The characteristic of cavalry was mobility. When needed, they would greatly separate from these strange dolls and make a detour; they could also go to help Tigre and Elizavetta.

As she took a breath of relief, she looked at Mashas who was next to her.

“I was surprised. To think that Lord Mashas has already seen such things.”

“No, I haven’t.”

Mashas answered in a calm voice without taking his eyes off the swarm of dolls. To Lim who was at a loss for words to this unexpected reply, Mashas continued.

“Frankly speaking, I think that we were saved by the fact that there are only 100 cavalrymen. If this was 500 or 1000 cavalrymen, they would have probably dispersed as a result of confusion.”

Mashas leaked a sigh while stroking his gray beard. Lim finally opened her mouth.

“Is it a lie...?”

“For an instant bluff, it was so-so, right? It’s only makeshift.”

Mashas remained calm. This old Earl of Brune pulled off something not only Lim, but even Urz or Elizavetta probably wouldn’t have been able to do.

Baba Yaga opened wide her eyes and stared at the clods dolls which she created and the Lebus soldiers. Lim’s and Masha’s conversation could also be heard by this demon.

Aside from Lim’s scolding-like encouragement, even the old witch was dumbfounded by Masha’s statement. But, the old demon woman, far from losing her temper, struck her broom on the ground while holding back her laughter.

“He’s an interesting human. It’ll be a waste to kill him here.”

Although saying so, Baba Yaga’s eyes were calmly observing the situation. Those clod dolls would be enough for the Lebus soldiers. Even if the 100 cavalrymen had attacked her all at once, Baba Yaga had the confidence that she would drive them away while laughing.

Currently, this man and this woman who were in front of her were her priority.

The darkish red-haired youth’s black pupils blurring together intense hostility, doubt and some uneasiness glared at Baba Yaga. It looked like Elizavetta had no longer the energy to raise her body, and she was sitting on the ground.

“What do you mean by having given her power?”

Urz threw a question. The old demon woman perfectly understood what the youth was thinking.

He obviously wanted to know the true meaning of Baba Yaga’s words. But, Urz’s aim wasn’t only that. While looking for an opening to gather the arrows scattered on the ground, he was also trying to gain time for Elizavetta to recover.

“How admirable.”

At the back of her hood, the old demon woman revealed a sneer. As for Baba Yaga, she wanted to shake Urz. This was because though this human youth was indubitably the “bow”, she could not feel its presence for some reason. This old woman was concerned about it.

—*Vodyanoy...*

Without voicing it out, Baba Yaga called out. After a short pause, a reply came with a bored tone of voice.

『What is it?』

—*Can you feel the smell of the “bow” from this human boy?*

『If baa-san doesn’t notice, there is no way I will, right?』

Vodyanoy responded with a tone showing that he did not feel any motivation at all. He was currently lurking underground. When she showed up before Elizavetta, Baba Yaga also had him come just in case. Vodyanoy also consented to come with “if I can meet the bow”.

With the result like this, it couldn’t also be helped that he was discouraged.

While tapping her shoulder with her broomstick, Baba Yaga looked at Urz.

“This girl you see, she prayed to me; that she doesn’t want to lose. That she doesn’t want to lose to anyone.”

Urz frowned. While watching the youth’s reaction, Baba Yaga continued.

A year ago, Elizavetta who lost a duel against Elen came across a run-down shrine when she was taking a walk in Lebus. At that time, Baba Yaga who read the boiling feelings that Elizavetta was holding in her heart called out to her.

『Don’t you want power?』

Though Elizavetta seemed to be puzzled, she answered that she wanted it. Baba Yaga gave the girl the power she desired.

Baba Yaga who finished narrating briefly looked at Urz and Elizavetta with a sneer.

“Don’t you believe my words? No, it can’t be helped if you don’t want to believe them. Hey, boy. How about you ask the girl there? It’s definitely the best way to ascertain it.”

Urz stood stock still on the spot as he was amazed. Although thinking that he didn't believe it, his eyes which he turned to Elizavetta weren't able to remain calm.

Elizavetta who was crouched down on the ground holding her right arm raised her face.

Their eyes met. She distorted her expression to the extent that she was likely to cry at any time and diverted her eyes. The shame and humiliation of having something known which she didn't want to be known was overflowing from her face.

—Master...

Urz could not utter his voice. Baba Yaga's explanation should also have reached her ears. Why didn't she deny the old witch's words that were full of malice? Why didn't she shake her head with a resolute face?

"Shall I continue the story?"

As if enjoying Urz's and Elizavetta's reactions, the old demon woman said. With only that, Elizavetta got agitated and her shoulders trembled. It was just as the demon expected.

But, Elizavetta suddenly raised her face.

"I... I never considered this power to be a thing worth thanking. I never abused it! I used it only when I had no other choice..."

She desperately shouted, but it reached Urz's ears with a slightly empty sound. Baba Yaga rounded her back and amusedly laughed.

"You can say anything you want. But, no matter how much you hide it, I know. I don't think you want to part with the power that I gave you."

"That's not..."

"I know. It's the power I gave you. In the first place, if you really think that you don't want it; shouldn't you cut off your right arm?"

Interrupting Elizavetta's weak rebuttal, the old demon woman continued while laughing.

"In the end, you want power so much that you can't help it. You said that you used it only when you had no other choice, but looking at it from another perspective, you thought that it becomes a reassuring weapon at critical moments, right?"

Elizavetta's face turned pale. She could not deny Baba Yaga's words. So could not Urz, too. He must not let this demon talk any more than this. Even though he understood that he must help the master whom he serves, his legs did not move.

"When you wielded your power against others don't have one, didn't you feel a pleasant sensation? You know that there are powers that are hard to get, and which will never be obtained by those who pile up effort and training. Wish, desire, attachment; young girl, you're exactly such a human."

Baba Yaga lightly wagged her left hand. As if getting hooked by it, Elizavetta stood up. No, she was dragged by her right hand and forcibly made to stand.

"Now, you should use the power that you desired. As long as you have this power, you won't lose. Even if you yourself think that you've lost, a certain defeat won't arrive. If you want to part with it, deny it. That you don't need such a power. Though it'll be impossible no matter how much you struggle."

Elizavetta desperately tried to restrain her right hand. But, she leaked out a short scream and crouched down on the spot. An acute pain ran through her right arm.

—Is there nothing I can do to help master?

Urz clenched his fist and glared at the small-sized old woman.

Why did Baba Yaga explain so carefully? This old witch knew for sure that talking about a detailed fact was the most effective way to give shock and despair to Urz and Elizavetta.

Much to their chagrin, that way of doing things succeeded above all else. Elizavetta hung her head down and her shoulders were shaking. Without being able to return even a word to the demon's sneer.

—Not wanting to lose, she wanted power, huh...

The youth could not deny that feeling of Elizavetta. This was because Urz had also wanted power when they had confronted the Double Headed Dragon.

—But, the power given by this hag isn't good. Only that, I can't accept.

Urz wanted to shout so. Elizavetta should also understand that.

"I, don't want to lose..."

As he muttered that, Urz desperately worked out his thoughts.

I don't want to lose. I don't want to lose to anyone. She said that; this was what Elizavetta wished for.

And so, Baba Yaga heard her wish and gave her power.

How could he make her deny that power? Groundless words and methods weren't good. Besides, Baba Yaga would probably counter them with plausible words.

The frightening aspect of old demon woman was the fact that she could play with one's feelings. Compared to that, employing a dragon or using strange magic was nothing.

Urz desperately thought about words to persuade Elizavetta.

There is no human who has never lost. Or, there are many things you can get from defeat.

Saying such things was not good. Elizavetta should understand things to that extent.

Persuading her, that including Naum and Lazarl there were many people supporting her.

That also was not good. According to Baba Yaga's words, it was one year ago that Elizavetta wanted that power. She was already Vanadis; Naum and Lazarl also obeyed her. In that situation still, Elizavetta sought power.

It wasn't something which could deny her strong feeling of not wanting to lose.

Urz looked at the bow held in his left hand.

—If I had the power of the black bow...

Power in order to not lose; in that case, he should just deny it (power given by Baba Yaga) with a greater power. If it was that black bow which blew off the Double Headed Dragon's head, then he should be able to do that much.

—No! What am I thinking?

Urz violently shook his head and drove away that thought. If he could draw out that black bow, it might certainly be able to surpass Baba Yaga's power. However, that was a brutal power which could hurt Elizavetta. One wrong move and he might take her life.

The tight situation without room irritated Urz.

There was no time to think about what's right. Even if little information was connected (connecting the dots between Baba Yaga's story and Elizavetta), even if he did not have conviction, he had to act.

“Urz. Escape...”

Elizavetta said. While being dragged by her right hand, she continued intermittently with a weak voice.

“Time until you escape, I will at least...”

Urz's chest ached at her words. While Elizavetta tried to let Urz escape, even so she did not try to deny Baba Yaga's power.

The youth remembered about Elizavetta's past life which he heard about from Naum. It was understandable that she craved for power and clung to it. Even so, he had to tear her off from that power.

Suddenly, something flashed through Urz's mind.

It was a dangerous bet. But, Urz thought that if it went well, it could strongly persuade Elizavetta more than a half-hearted persuasion and even the black bow's power.

Urz stared straight at Elizavetta and opened his mouth.

“—Master. Let's make a bet.”

“A bet...?”

Elizavetta stared at Urz with a dumbfounded face. The youth's words surprised the red-haired Vanadis that much. What on earth was he thinking in this situation? Didn't he blurt out something unexpected as he was unable to endure reality?

Of course, Urz was calm. He calmly nodded and explained.

"It's something simple. I will shoot an arrow at you right now. If you can fend it off, it's master's win. If you can't, it's master's defeat. What do you say?"

"You said something quite interesting, boy."

Baba Yaga laughed.

"So, you intend to deny the power that I gave the girl by defeating her. It is not bad for a makeshift idea. But, can you, who are just an ordinary human, do it?"

Urz looked at Baba Yaga with a composed attitude so as not to let her discern his strain and impatience.

"You said that I'm just an ordinary human. Perhaps, do you understand what kind of human I am?"

Urz grasped the bow with an impudent smile using more power than necessary. Conflict was repeated in his heart about whether it was really all right with this method?

But, he could not afford to think any further.

And, there were only Urz and Elizavetta here now. Lim, Mashas, and the Lebus soldiers have their action obstructed by the dolls created by the old witch.

Urz had to do it. After all, there was only this opportunity now.

Though Baba Yaga did not answer, she showed no signs of moving. It looked like she intended to watch this bet.

—All right.

Urz inwardly raised a voice of joy as he broke through the greatest obstacle. He was most afraid of Baba Yaga's intervention. If this demon had laughed at Urz's proposal and given orders to Elizavetta's right hand, he wouldn't have been able to avoid the worst outcome.

When Urz picked up one arrow which had fell on the ground, he carefully wiped the sickle and the feathers with the hem of his clothes. It was an arrow which he could by no means miss. He should pile up caution on top on caution.

He set up his bow and nocked the arrow. He pulled the bowstring only to halfway.

—You were way too cautious of me.

The old demon woman knew that the youth had a power beyond human understanding. And she found it strange that he did not use it. Therefore, she probably allowed only him to approach while making Lim, Mashas, and the Lebus soldiers face the clod dolls.

He thought that if he said something unexpected, she would watch the situation at least once without interfering, and it was as he planned.

—One more concern is...

Urz shook his head as he thought about it. It was meaningless even if he thought about it. He just had to believe in himself and shoot the arrow.

Urz and Elizavetta were opposite to each other. The red-haired Vanadis loosely lowered both her arms, closed her eyes and stood stock still on the spot. Her figure looked like either she believed in Urz or she gave up on everything.

He must make her understand; that she did not need that power.

Wind blew. Urz held his breathe and focused his consciousness on his fingertips.

The air which grew tense wrapped the place. The wind stopped. The youth's fingers separated from the bowstring and the arrow.

Rather than tearing the wind, the arrow flew riding on it. The target was Elizavetta's right arm.

“What is it...?”

A sigh of disappointment leaked from the old demon's mouth.

“Isn't it just an arrow without any power?”

Elizavetta's right hand raised the Thunder Swirl and was about to smash the arrow approaching her. No matter how accurate the aim was, it was just an arrow. It looked like it could be smashed to pieces by one swing of the black whip.

But, that did not happen.

Valitsaif unnaturally changed its trajectory in the air, drew an arc and twined around Elizavetta's right hand. The red-haired Vadnais's eyes widened to this.

From the handle to the tip the Thunder Swirl was tinged with white light and it released a feeble thunder stroke to its master's right hand. A groan of short pain leaked from Elizavetta's mouth.

And, the arrow shot by the youth pierced Elizavetta's upper arm. Fresh blood scattered and the red-haired Vanadis staggered.

Sweat suddenly gushed out from the face of Urz who confirmed it. After a short pause, the youth took down the bow and greatly exhaled. His fingertips faintly trembled.

His feeling of relief was much greater than his joy.

“You said it, right? That you gave her power out of her wish of not wanting to lose.”

While fixing his breathing, Urz gazed at Baba Yaga.

"But with the power you gave her, master's wish won't come true. No — as long as she holds that power, master will lose."

Even if she wielded the power given to her, the Viralt would force Elizavetta to defeat.

If Elizavetta still persisted in clinging to Baba Yaga's power, she would have to choose. Either continuing to be a Vanadis or abandoned being a Vanadis.

Urz had a firm belief that there was no way that she would abandon being a Vanadis.

And as long as Elizavetta was a Vanadis, her Viralt would not leave her side.

Even for Valitsaif, if it was grasped in Elizavetta's hand and was wielded by her will, it might have stayed quiet. Precisely because it felt the will of someone other than Elizavetta in her right arm, the Viralt moved on its own.

Elizavetta understood it, too. Applying her left hand to her right arm which the black whip had twined around, Elizavetta sat on the spot. From her eyes of different colors, large drops of tears overflowed.

"...Sorry. I'm sorry, Valitsaif."

Her Viralt does not utter words. But, so as to comfort her, the Thunder Swirl was tinged with white light.

Perhaps, Valitsaif was waiting for this moment.

Elizavetta would definitely have no choice but to use the power given by Baba Yaga when necessary. In other words, it would be when she would fall into a dangerous situation if she didn't use that power.

That's why the Thunder Swirl wasn't able to stop Elizavetta. After all, she might have lost her life.

Elizavetta pulled out the arrow which pierced her right arm. Fresh blood scattered and wetted the ground. Tears had wetted the ground at her feet.

"I was scared all along. I didn't want to lose to anyone or anything."

To the point of having clung to a fake power.

Tightly grasping the Thunder Swirl in her right hand, Elizavetta stood up. Her pupils devoid of all hesitation stared at Baba Yaga.

"If you still recognize this me as a Vanadis, then please lend me your power, Valitsaif."

As if responding to her voice, white lightning surged from the tip of the handle of the black whip.

On the other hand, Baba Yaga snorted in displeasure.

Of course, the fact that her interference to Elizavetta became weak as she rejected her wish was not funny. But more than that, she didn't like the fact that Urz did not reveal the power of the black bow. The old witch's purpose was Urz, and Elizavetta was only a playmate.

"As you wish. I no longer have business with the "Whip". I guess I shall kill you and take the "Bow". If I bring him to Drekavac, he might understand something."

An ominous bloodlust was released from the demon's whole body. Urz and Elizavetta unintentionally stepped back. The old witch's eyes peeped out from the back of the hood and emitted a white light. The hand grasping the broom was dyed black, and her small-sized body rapidly swelled up and pressed against her black robe.

"I won't be careless like before."

A sharp horn stuck out from her forehead and tore up her hood from the inside. Her hooked nose increased its sharpness, her mouth tore up to her ears and white fangs peeped out from it. The whiteness of the fangs strangely stood out as her skin was black. Her eyes were hung up to a frightening extent and her ears also became long and slender and sharp on the edges. It was no longer a human's face.

Her robe was torn off. The small-sized old woman who should have been much smaller than Elizavetta owned a body like a human adult now. Making a dry sound, the broom grasped in the demon's hand disappeared.

The skin was jet black and her body was so thin, enough to make one think it was made only of skin and bones. And on her back, there were huge wings very similar to those of a bat.

As Baba Yaga stuck out her chest and looked up at the sky, she greatly opened her mouth and breathed out black fog-like miasma. As if expressing the joy of throwing off her tight clothes.

—Is this that old woman's true form...?

Urz opened his eyes wide and stood petrified in utter amazement. The shock due to the demon's transformation was great and he didn't know what the best thing to do was.

"Prepare yourself to lose at least one arm, "Bow"."

A fireball was produced above Baba Yaga's head and fired towards Urz. However, the mass of hell fire that attacked and was clad in flickering flames was blown off by something just before hitting the youth. A roaring sound shook the atmosphere and a blast and sparks tinged with heat burnt Urz's skin and rouse him.

"Urz! Pull yourself together!"

Having scolded him was Elizavetta. The Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl grasping the black whip with her left hand and burning intense fighting spirit in her eyes of different colors glared at the demon.

"Oh my! So the young girl who was crouched down on the verge of tears until just a while ago is acting like a full-fledged warrior."

Elizavetta laughed at Baba Yaga's provocation.

"It's as you said. I showed quite an unsightly appearance."

Reflecting Elizavetta's anger, the black whip's tip shone tinged with intense lighting.

"That's why I decided to destroy you and take back anything and everything."

The Lebus soldiers who were facing the group of clod dolls weren't able to stay as calm as their master. The small old women had suddenly transformed into an atrocious monster like one coming out from an old tale.

When they shifted their gazes, the faceless dolls silently approached. It looked as like they were rolled up in the world of an ugly fairy tale.

If there were those who doubted their own eyes and stood petrified, there were also those who fell off their horses because of too much surprise. They were even soldiers who fainted on horseback after having shouted "monster". Those stirred up by instinctive fear threw away their weapons, turned the necks of their horses and swiftly rode their horses trying to escape from the demon by even a little.

There, the clod dolls attacked like a cluster. Lim and Mashas allowed the approach of the dolls while in confusion and had no choice but to wield their sword.

The sword which Lim wielded sent the head of the nearest doll flying. Mashas' sword also cut the arm of another doll. Judging from the sensation transmitted through the sword, the dolls were slightly harder than clay.

—In this case...

Fixing her breathing, Lim held a faint hope inwardly. However, that hope was immediately swallowed by a new shock. Even after losing the head or an arm, the dolls' movements did not decline at all. They stretched their remaining hand, or dragged their body trying to collide it with them (Lim and Mashas and company).

One Lebus soldier was caught by the dolls and dragged down to the ground. The dolls swarmed around that soldier who fell on his back.

The scream which was raised stopped halfway. The dolls thrust their hands or fingers and from the gaps of the armor tore apart the soldier's body.

The soldier whose face was smashed by stone-like hands, with his eyes and nose crushed and his mouth torn died. Arms and legs were also scooped out from his body and white bones in the flesh dyed dark red peeped out.

This ghastly scene was unfolding everywhere.

Among the Lebus soldiers, there were also those who held their ground and wielded their sword. But, before an opponent that was too different from convention, they couldn't display their usual power and were gradually overwhelmed. Lim and Mashas tended to retreat several times, but there were so many dolls that they couldn't move as they wanted.

Lim and Mashas swung their swords to the dolls that approach.

A doll, whose waist was bisected, divided into the upper and lower part of the body fell. But, the lower part immediately stood up and came to collide with them. Similarly, the upper part advanced as it crawled on the ground and tried to catch the horse's legs.

"It might have been better to prepare a mace rather a sword for these guys."

Out of breath, Mashas grumbled. How should they fight an enemy who approached without fearing swords and did not stop their movements even after losing their head or an arm?

"Lord Tigrevurmud..."

Lim clenched her teeth and looked at Urz, Elizavetta, and the strange monster which was on the other side of the swarm of dolls. Compared to that monster, these clod dolls shouldn't be that big a deal. They (Elizavetta and Urz) should need help much more than them.

However, the reality was that Lim didn't have even the power to mow down these dolls.

"Limalisha-dono. I will gain time here. Gather the remaining soldiers and retreat."

Mashas said. The old Earl's grey hair and beard were heavily moist with sweat and some parts of his sword were chipped. That was no surprise; he had continued cutting the dolls.

To Masha's proposal, Lim unusually got angry. Her golden hair was also disheveled and the forelocks stuck to her forehead.

"What are you saying? You are an important guest for LeitMeritz."

Even while they exchanged words, the clod dolls crowded round. Though Lim eagerly swung her sword, the sword blade finally broke and flew.

—This is it, huh...

It was already too late to escape.

"—Step back, Lim."

At that time, Lim even thought that she heard an auditory hallucination. It was that sudden.

When she turned around with a surprised expression, silver hair fluttering in the wind jumped into her view. Ruby-colored pupils retaining fighting spirit were turned to the clod dolls. On the hand was a long sword with a silver blade. The blade was clad in an invisible wind.

Passing through between Lim and Mashas, she stepped forward. She swung the long sword straight down.

“—Ley Admos!”



The wind released from the long sword jumped in between the dolls while raging like a beast. The whirlwind pulverized dozens of dolls in an instant.

Setting up the long sword again, the girl scrutinized the scene.

"There were unexpectedly many of them."

Lim finally uttered her voice.

"Eleonora-sama...!"

It was the Vanadis of LeitMeritz, the "Wind Princess of the Silver Flash" Eleonora Viltaria.



It was fortunate for Elen that this place, where Urz and company were, was southeast of Lebus. This was because it was a distance of about two days nearer than Lebus' castle town.

Furthermore, it also saved her some trouble since Elizavetta was there. Arifal sensed Valitsaif's presence and told Elen.

The silver-haired Vanadis wielded her long sword and cut the swarm of clod dolls one after another. Lim and Mashas looked at that scene with eyes wide opened. When the clod dolls were cut by Arifal's blade, they crumbled onto the ground and stop moving again.

Without stopping her hand wielding the long sword, Elen glared at Baba Yaga who was far away.

It was definitely not a beast. It was also different from a dragon. It was a monster which kneaded ill will.

"So that is a demon..."

Elen's voice got dry with a shudder enough to make her understand this fact. Her hands which held the reins damply got wet with sweat. If she was not conscious of it, her breathing would become confused with strain.

She had heard about the existence of demons from Sasha and Sofy.

But, hearing and seeing are two different things after all. This was the first time that Elen had ever seen a demon.

"Lim, Lord Mashas. I will hear the situation later. May I leave these soldiers to you?"

If she believed the story of Sasha and Sofy, only a Vanadis could confront such a monster.

"Understood."

"I shall exert my poor ability."

Lim and Mashas who finally fixed their breathing answered respectively. As Elen nodded with a smile, she rode her horse. She made her horse jump into the middle of the dolls.

She swept to the right and mowed down to the left. Each time Arifal drew a silver trail in the space, a whirlwind arose. Cutting down all the swarms of dolls which approached her, Elen resolutely charged into the midst of the enemy. Baba Yaga, seeming to have focused her consciousness to Urz and Elizavetta, didn't do anything to her who was approaching.

The silver-haired Vanadis passed through the swarm of dolls.

“—Hold on.”

At that moment, a black shadow jumped out from the side and rushed onto Elen. The silver-haired Vanadis reflexively wielded her long sword.

A hard sound also similar to the clash of a metal and a rock resounded. The black shadow greatly leapt back and took distance from Elen. Elen also pulled the reins, stopped her horse and glared at that shadow.

It was a young man. He had twined a green cloth around his black short hair and wore thick clothes which treated fur to the collar and sleeves.

Elen knitted her brows. The Silver Flash in her hand was not an ordinary sword. It was a Viralt which could cut and tore even the scales of a dragon, much less thick armor and helmet. It should be difficult even to catch it.

—It looked like he flipped it with his hand...

If a human were to do such a thing, his hand would obviously be blown off. But if the opponent wasn't human, then it was a different story. Arifal grasped by Elen briskly emitted a warning. And above all, this man had an eeriness which was very similar to Baba Yaga's coiled around him.

“You aren't human, eh.”

“Can you tell, master of the Silver Flash?”

The man called Elen like so. The silver-haired Vanadis' expression became more and more severe.

Elen did not know, but this man was Vodyanoy.

“As expected, two Vanadis will be too much for her. I also don't know yet what to do with the “Bow”. I don't want to let you assist them.”

“I don't understand at all what you're saying, but—”

Elen set up her long sword and turned around to Vodyanoy. The strange atmosphere of something inhuman emitted by Vodyanoy made Elen become cautious.

“I understand that you’re an enemy.”

Elen got off her horse. Leaving the case that he was not human aside, she realized that with an opponent who was not so, it would be rather disadvantageous to be on horseback. Vodyanoy who saw that squinted.

“That’s a good judgment.”

When he finished speaking, Vodyanoy kicked the ground. The distance to Elen should be about ten steps, and yet he shortened it in an instant. Although Elen was surprised at his movement, she didn’t get confused. She wielded the Silver Flash while falling back.

A sound similar to a blade sound reverberated and Vodyanoy’s right hand vigorously jumped up. At the same time, Elen’s long sword was also flipped.

“As expected, it’s the hand, huh...!”

“It isn’t just the hand.”

Vodyanoy greatly opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue; his tongue stretched. The dark red tongue approached Elen straight like a spear. The silver-haired Vanadis opened her eyes wide, promptly twisted her body and dodged it. But, Vodyanoy’s tongue suddenly drew an arc and twined around Elen’s right hand.

It was a tremendous power, and it tried to draw Elen towards Vodyanoy. Elen did not resist its power. She instead went with the flow as she lightly kicked the floor, and shortened the distance to Vodyanoy at a stretch. Stretching out her left hand meanwhile transferring Arifal which was in her right hand to her left hand, she twisted her body.

A swing. The long sword glittered and cut the dark red tongue faster than Vodyanoy who noticed Elen’s movement could retract it. As expected, even the demon held his mouth and bent backward.

“—Shadow Wind.”

Without pause, Elen kicked the ground. While shortening the distance to Vodyanoy, she grasped the Silver Flash with both hands. Moreover, Arifal accelerated her movement with the power of wind.

With a driving cry of drive, Elen struck with her long sword. Vodyanoy vigorously raised his right foot against it.

A strong shock blew off Elen and Vodyanoy respectively. Elen wore wind on her body with the power of the Silver Flash and got away from the enemy without breaking her posture. On the other hand, although Vodyanoy greatly broke his posture, he also took distance from Elen while jumping on the ground with only his left foot.

Vodyanoy lifted his right foot and fixedly stared at it.

“This was my favorite, you know?”

The shoe which Vodyanoy wore was torn up by the crash just now and the shoe sole completely tore off. On the other hand, Elen did not care about that. It looked like she would become crazy if she faced this man any further.

“Really, what kind of body do you have?”

Even though not that much time had passed yet since they began to fight, several lines of sweat streamed down Elen’s face. Her breathing was also beginning to be confused.

Be it when she was in a mercenary group or after she became a Vanadis, Elen had traveled to many battlefields. However, she had never encountered such a monster.

Vodyanoy, not answering Elen’s question, mumblingly moved the inside of his mouth, but he soon greatly opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue.

The tongue which Elen should have cut off had completely regenerated.

While stroking his tongue with his fingertip, Vodyanoy contentedly nodded.

“It just regenerated, so the sensation is still slightly weak (dull?)”

Elen once again felt a shiver.



Spreading her wings, Baba Yaga flew into the air.

The demon raised both her hands. Crimson flames were created between them, swelled up in a flash and became a fireball. Elizavetta swung the Thunder Swirl to it, which approached while devouring the atmosphere.

The fireball was blown off into pieces and sparks poured down on Elizavetta. Urz picked up arrows and shot them, but Baba Yaga didn’t even try to avoid them. They bounced on the demon’s skin and fell to the ground.

In both of Baba Yaga’s hands, lightning shining white was created this time.

“—Thunder Blade (Melnit)!”

In response to Elizavetta’s shout, the black whip changed its shape to that of a sword. The red-haired Vanadis repelled the shot lightning with Valitsaif. Particles of white light scattered into the atmosphere.

Without pause, Baba Yaga nose dove and attacked Elizavetta. The demon’s claws and the lightning sword clashed, and the jet black old witch flew to the sky using the shock provoked by that clash.

Elizavetta quickly turned her body around and turned towards the demon. It seemed that the equal clash left only a shock to the hand of both parties.

“I’m being played well ...”

As Baba Yaga flew in the sky, she released a fireball and thunderbolt and attacked under the cover of flames and light. And after having given a blow, she escaped again into the sky. It was the repeated of this over and over.

Urz could only watch Elizavetta's and Baba Yaga's fight with a hopeless expression.

When he surveyed the surroundings, Elen was fighting Vodyanoy in a distant place, Lim and Mashas and a small number of Lebus soldiers were still fighting the clod dolls. Although everyone fought hard and they fell into numerical inferiority, they were still fighting strenuously.

Only Urz was powerless.

—What should I do?

Urz grasped his bow desperately and prayed.

That he wanted power like the time when he fought against the Double Headed Dragon underground in a run-down shrine.

The current him would become just a hindrance to Elizavetta. There were few arrows, so even if he shot them, they would probably not even inflict a scratch.

“——Urz.”

Elizavetta said while wielding the Thunder Swirl. Her body was black smeared with soot, her red hair was disheveled and her dress was slightly and there was nothing left of what it used to look like. Within it, only her golden pupil and her blue pupil were shining tinged with vitality.

“You escape.”

“But, master...”

To Urz who was about to refute, the red-haired Vanadis curtly declared.

“This is an order. Won't you listen to what I say?”

Her feelings which the Rainbow Eyes revealed in the depths of her pupils cleared away Urz's hesitation. Even if he was here, he would only get in Elizavetta's way. He must hurry to Lim, Mashas and the others.

“I understand.”

“——Urz.”

Her back turned on him, Elizavetta called out to the youth.

“You did your best which is more than enough. Be proud of that.”

Urz began to run. Baba Yaga who saw that released a fireball at Elizavetta; meanwhile, she nose dive while drawing an arc in the sky.

It was at that time that Elizavetta stretched out her body on the ground while vigorously twisting it. While lying down, she wielded the Thunder Swirl.

“—Slash and brush aside the dark night, ephemeral fang (Nott Rubeed)!”

A roaring sound shook the sky. A dazzling flash was emitted from the tip of the black whip and it filled the surroundings with a white light. Taken by surprise, Baba Yaga’s eyes were burnt.

Elizavetta continued a swing tossed about for this instant. It wouldn’t have been possible if the demon wasn’t focusing on Urz though.

Elizavetta got up immediately. She was able to avoid a direct hit of the fireball having stretched out her body on the ground. Since Urz had his back turned on them, he did not receive the Veda’s effect.

The red-haired Vanadis shortened the distance from Baba Yaga and swung the black whip. The thunder stroke which Valitsaif wore swelled up and countless electric discharges arose. The whip which was tinged with a white shine and undulated in the space was divided in nine parts from the tip of the handle; each part clad in lighting harked back to a dragon raging.

“—Burn and Split Heaven and Earth (Gron Lazriga)!”

The released thunder burned Baba Yaga’s left arm, passed through as such and attacked the clod dolls from behind. The shock wave contained in the thunder stroke pulverized the dolls altogether.

As a result, it opened a narrow path to Lim and company. It was the path which Elizavetta had created for Urz. Near it, Elen was fighting with Vodyanoy.

While feeling the aftermath of the Veda on his skin, Urz eagerly ran.

“—I won’t let you escape.”

As she annoyingly spitted out, Baba Yaga mowed down her burnt left arm. Elizavetta who was exhausted from using Vedas in succession, was unable to avoid it, and was thrust away. As she got down on a knee without being concern any more than that with the red-haired Vanadis, the jet black old witch chanted an incantation.

At that moment, overhead of Baba Yaga — darkness was born in the empty space. It swelled up in a time even shorter than an instant and became a jet black snake as big as a pillar of a huge castle.

“Take this.”

That darkness was the miasma created by Baba Yaga.

The huge snake-shaped black darkness wiggled its body and approached Urz from behind. It rushed on with an uncanny stillness emitting neither sound nor voice. In its mouth which was greatly opened up, thick sharp fangs of darkness were lined up.

—It'll catch up...!

At that time, silver hair jumped into Urz's field of vision.

“—Tigre!”

It was Ellen. When the silver-haired Vanadis had flipped off from Vodyanoy, she turned around in the sky using that momentum and jumped. She ran to Urz and got down behind the youth.

She took a small breath. Her red eyes glared at the jaw of the snake which approached Urz. The Silver Flash's blade sucked up the atmosphere, wound it on and built up a big hatchet of ferocious windstorm.

“—Ley Admos!”

The stormy vortex released from the silver blade became a huge invisible blade that attacked the big dark snake. The shock wave scooped out the earth and the wind screamed and raged.

Elen stared wide-eyed. The big snake formed by the miasma was certainly blown off with one blow of the Veda, but as it soundlessly flickered, it regained its original form in an instant.

It was not only Elen who was caught in a bout of surprise. It was the same for Urz who was watching her actions from directly behind her. And, the youth noticed that Elen stood bolt upright.

“What are you doing?!”

A slight stiffness in the instant immediately after having released her Veda.

Urz didn't know what would have been known if he was Tigrevurmud Vorn.

The dark big snake which had completely regenerated its head was going to devour her. Urz hugged Elen from behind and fell down with her on the ground as such.

The big dark snake passed above the two people's bodies.

However, Urz's act only delayed the result brought about by Elen's moment of stillness just a little. As the big dark snake once again wriggled its tall figure in the air, it attacked Urz and Elen who finally got up from right above.

In the sky, Baba Yaga revealed a distorted smile.

“I don't mind. Swallow him along with the Vanadis.”

Both Urz and Elen had a knee on the ground, and would probably not be able to escape from the big snake no matter how they move. The youth cursed his own carelessness.

Suddenly, Elen stretched out her hand from the side and embraced Urz. She held the youth's head with her left arm, raised the Silver Flash and tried to use a Veda.

Faster than that, the snake of darkness swallowed the two of them as it devoured the ground along as well.

"Urz! Eleonora!"

Elizavetta's sorrowful cry echoed in the dark indigo sky.



When he regained consciousness, Urz felt a faint suffocation and at the same time a strange sensation.

His field of vision was wrapped in darkness. Something soft was pressed on his face, but strangely he did not feel any discomfort.

—What is this?

Urz moved his right arm and touched it. There was warmth and it was roundish. It was so soft that his fingers sunk and it had elasticity to the extent of pushing back his fingers while they were on it.

"—Hey!"

He heard a scolding-like girl's voice immediately next to him. Urz's body stiffened out of surprise. His hand was caught by something and slowly torn off.

"Know your place. Jeez... With this, I wonder how many times I've been felt by you. You're the only one, you know?"

A little shyness was included in her amazed voice. Urz finally understood what the thing which was pressed on his face was and in what kind of situation he was now in.

"Eleonora...sama"

"...That's right."

Elen's reply to Urz's mutter was slightly late and somewhat lonely.

In the darkness, Urz was hugged by Elen. What was pressed on the youth's face was the swelling of her rich chest. Urz tried to swiftly separate from her, but Elen held the youth's head with her left hand not letting him.

"Don't struggle. Even I don't know what would happen if I let you."

To the silver-haired Vanadis' words which were to admonish him, Urz pulled himself together.

—Speaking of which, we have been swallowed by that big snake...

The youth finally remembered what happened just before he lost consciousness. If so, then it meant that this was inside the big snake's stomach.

Urz softly held her waist and looked around.

However, nothing except darkness was reflected in the youth's view. There was no light at all here. It was to the extent that it had an optical illusion that perhaps he had not opened his eyes yet. The air filling in the darkness was lukewarm and unpleasant.

Urz also got flustered to the fact that there was nothing to touch other than Elen. Even if he desperately stretched out his legs and hands and moved, far from touching a wall or the ground, they didn't get entangled on anything. He didn't even know whether he was floating or sinking.

Elen who noticed Urz stirring said as to calm him.

"At least, there is nothing in the range of about 10 Alsins around us. I made Arifal check it."

The youth couldn't see it, but the Silver Flash was grasped in Elen's right hand. She created wind and made it check on how their surroundings were.

"That big snake obviously wasn't a living thing, but its insides don't seem to be ordinary, either. Now then, what to do..."

"Why did you protect me?"

Looking up at Elen who seemed to be thinking, Urz unintentionally spoke of words which sounded more like blame.

"By using this sword's power, you should have been able to escape by yourself."

At that time, Elen had protected Urz. In that situation where she protected the youth, she tried to use her Veda. For that reason, her action was late and the two of them were swallowed by the big snake. If she had abandoned Urz, she would have definitely made it in time.

Elen did not answer immediately. She put strength to the left arm holding Urz's head.

Though the youth who found himself being pressed more on her rich swellings felt tense, even so he looked up at the silver-haired Vanadis with a serious expression without being flustered any more than necessary.

"Let's see. It's as you say. I should have done so."

Though Elen calmly said so, it was a tone as if answering not to Urz, but to somebody else. A breeze shook and suddenly passed on Urz's cheeks. Arifal was comforting its master.

"I gave priority to only you over anyone and anything. I guess I'm disqualified as a Vanadis."

Silence fell.

Staring at Elen who should be in the darkness, Urz was not able to utter any words. This was because to her words now, he could sense her strong feelings in the throbbing transmitted to her left hand, which hugged him, from her chest. Elen calmly continued her words.

"But, if I had abandoned you at that time, I wouldn't have been able to remain the me that I am right now. Even if I grieved on that day, I might become able to laugh someday. I might become able to walk looking ahead. But, that would be me, and at the same time not me."

Urz gritted his teeth and strongly clenched his fist. His nails cut into his palm and blood blotted. Even so, he wasn't able to repress the feelings which suddenly welled up.

— *What am I doing...?!*

Anger the likes of which he had never felt before wrapped the youth.

Elen was thinking in this way.

And yet, he, who could not remember yet, was here. He, who was Tigrevurmud Vorn.

Even though Elen protected him knowing full well that she might lose her life.

The one she helped was Urz.

The youth's anger was probably transmitted through her body which was in contact with his. Elen lightly tapped Urz's shoulders and said in a bright tone.

"Don't worry about it. It's something I did on my own accord. More importantly, we must quickly get out of here..."

The silver-haired Vanadis interrupted her words midway. A small groan which revealed pain leaked from her lips. Urz stared wide-eyed in surprise, but he immediately understood.

Darkness turned into small dust (rubbish) and coiled around them. It soundlessly burned Urz's skin. The pain which Elen received was probably the same, too.

What was frightening was that they had no means of resisting at all.

The dust of darkness approached then from all directions and all angles, burning anything in the range of about a fingertip from it. Without being able to avoid or prevent it, it was also impossible to escape from it in this space.

Feeling pain on the head, face, nape of the neck, shoulders, arms, belly and feet, Urz and Elen writhed. Elen caused created wind with Arifal and scattered the dust, but the dust immediately headed towards them again. It wasn't even a stopgap measure¹¹.

— *Judging from her interest in me, I thought that she wouldn't kill me yet, but...*

He wondered whether his thoughts were optimistic, or it just meant that she just wanted to harm him to a degree where he wouldn't die.

"It looks like there's nothing more we can do..."

Elen bitterly spitted out. Though she said that, one could guess from her voice that she hadn't given up yet, but it seemed to be a matter of time. Neither she nor Urz had any means of dealing with it.

The darkness overhead the two of them wriggled. Urz and Elen startled looked up there. Despite there being still no light, the two people clearly saw that movement.

A huge big snake, which was formed as the dust of darkness gathered, was slowly heading towards them.

"Arifal..."

Elen, not giving up, raised her long sword, but her voice was interrupted halfway. On the arm of the man (Urz), her body suddenly became heavy. She seemed to have lost consciousness.

It could be said that it was no wonder. In addition to a fierce battle, the dust of darkness was even now hurting them. As for Urz if he relaxed his guard, it seemed that his consciousness would fade away.

So as to not separate from her, Urz strongly hugged the silver-haired Vanadis.

The youth did give it his all like Elen, but while thinking about a method to come through this situation, he was seized with a strange sensation.

—I wonder what it is... What's with this situation?

He had once been put in a situation very similar to this. He had such a feeling.

It was not exactly the same, but by looking at the details, you might say that they were pretty similar.

It was an occurrence which made one lose all feelings. It made the youth hold a strong determination of not letting such a thing happen again.

—That's right. I absolutely won't let such a thing happen...!

He should have something in order to not let such a thing happen.

In the bottom of his consciousness, something called so. The man nodded without hesitating and reached out his hand to it.

He wanted to protect this silver-haired girl. Not because she had protected him

But because he was strongly thinking about her. Because he did not want to lose her.

There was a marsh in the depths of his consciousness. In that marsh that was deeply stagnating, he plunged his hand in.

The man shifted his body to the back and supported Elen with his body. He could maintain at least that posture. It was absolutely necessary in order to free both his arms.

Ahead of the man's gaze, the big dark snake increased its speed.

The man pushed straight up his left arm which became free.

"—Come!"

So as to not let an incident like the one of that time repeat.

Heat hovered in the man's left hand.

"Darkness" which was completely different from the darkness surrounding them appeared from within the man's hand and extended long and slender up and down. A string linked two ends (of the darkness) which were greatly warped.

There was a bow made from the "darkness" in man's left hand.

At the same time, countless scenes were revived in the man's consciousness. Every time one of the faces of the people whom he had met so far floated up, fighting spirit burnt in the man's black pupils.

When the face of a certain old man floated up, the color of sorrow flashed through the man's pupils. The old man's name was Bertrand and he had served as the man's personal attendant for a long time.

In the fight in the Sacred Caverns of the Palace (Sangroel), Bertrand protected the man and lost his life. Within the darkness.

"Darkness" was born in the man's right hand. It became an arrow in an instant.

When the man nocked the arrow to the bow, wind arose around Arifal which Elen held. The silver-haired Vanadis stared wide-eyed. This was because her Viralt, this long sword moved without her order.

The wind formed a current and gathered to the jet black arrow's sickle. The wind became a whirlpool, turned into a spiral and surrounded the arrow which the man held.

"We'll get out of here."

The man strongly drew the bow to the limit. He cried towards the snake which approached before their eyes.

"—You're in the way!"

The bowstring shook.

The shot arrow soundlessly pulverized the big snake. It charged to the upper part of it as is.

The man's target was not the big snake. It was not this darkness, either.

It was the demon ahead of it — Baba Yaga. If it was this "arrow", it should pass through everything, fly over all and pierce the demon.

After a short instant, a scream which couldn't be regarded as that of an old woman or that of a beast echoed. At the same time, the darkness surrounding the man and Elen collapsed and melted away.

They first felt the sensation of the hard ground from their shoe soles. And then they felt the wind blowing on their skins.

The sky which held down dusk was spread overhead.

Grasping a jet black bow in his left arm and holding Elen who lost consciousness in his right arm, the darkish red-haired youth stood on the desolate earth with a resolute figure.

"Ti...gre?"

A blurred voice tickled the man's eardrum. When he moved only his gaze and looked there, Elen who seemed to have regained consciousness narrowed her eyes and looked up at the man.



Spreading a smile on his lips, the man answered.

"Elen. Sorry for being late."

The silver-haired Vanadis' eyes were greatly opened wide and a smile floated on her face.

That way of calling her was the proof that the man was with no doubt Tigrevurmud Vorn.

“—Tigre.”

Elen once again called the youth's name; even though many words were overflowing in her mind, only that came out of her mouth.

The gray clouds which covered up the sky were interrupted and many lines of the setting sun's sunlight ran into the ground.

While taking the sunset with her back, Elizavetta struck dumb at the circumstances which happened in succession, stood stock still on the spot.

When she thought that the big dark snake had swallowed Elen and Urz, the big snake's head was blown off earlier than before time of about ten counts had passed.

It was indeed an instant. A ray of black light which surged from the inside of the big snake pierced the space as such, and shot out Baba Yaga who was in the sky.

That light that was released was without a doubt aiming for Baba Yaga.

As the jet black old witch staggered in the sky, she soundlessly disappeared just like that time in that run-down shrine. At the same time along with that, the clod dolls which Lim and company were fighting crumbled one after another. Like dolls of sand fanned by the wind.

Even the man called Vodyanoy who were fighting against Elen disappeared before she knew it.

And when the big dark snake disappeared, standing there were a man and a woman. The two people's short conversation rode upon the winds and reached the ears of Elizavetta who was standing in a distant place.

The red-haired Vanadis realized that it was over.

Both the nightmare and the dream went away with dusk.



A black lump moved to a snowy field where daylight didn't shine as it crawled. It was neither a beast nor a human.

That monster who walked while painfully breathing was Baba Yaga. She had escaped from the battlefield using all her remaining power.

Her left arm was burnt and it became like a dead rotting tree; the horn on her forehead was broken and half of her face was torn off. The wings on her back were also torn up here and there and exposed a horrible appearance. There were wounds all over her body and black blood was endlessly flowing.

In a world where one side was white, only traces of the monster walking exposed the ashen ground which was mixed with black stains.

“What a terrifying power. I thought I was done for good... No, but, he might become the ideal “Bow”.”

Baba Yaga stopped her movements and searched for a presence. It’s fine as long as she knew the location of the “Bow” and the Viralt.

Their presence was more than one Belsta away. Like this, they would not chase her.

But at the same time, Baba Yaga frowned. She felt the presence of a demon like her. And it was immediately nearby.

—*Is it Vodyanoy?*

However, if it was Vodyanoy, it was incomprehensible that he did not show up immediately.

Footsteps could be heard. Baba Yaga moved her aching body and looked there.

Standing there was a human. At least, in appearance.

A small-sized body wrapped in a thick overcoat. Small hands, short feet; a bald head wearing a hat. His eyelids were awfully big and so thin that you don’t know whether or not he had eyes.

Those who knew those traits would call him so. Duke Ganelon.

But, Baba Yaga called that man by a different name.

“Koschei^[2]...!”

Koschei. It was the name of someone non-human like Torbalan and Baba Yaga, handed down among people for a long time.

“—You’re wrong.”

Ganelon denied while grinning, and approached the demon showing no signs of fear. Baba Yaga turned her body and tried to escape, but in the next moment, the figure of Ganelon was before the old woman’s eyes. Even though there was a distance of about ten steps between both of them.

Ganelon’s small hand gripped the demon’s face.

“I’m Maximilian. Maximilian of the Ganelon House. The one called Koschei is no longer anywhere to be found on this earth.”

Some anger was included in his words.

The face of the old demon woman creaked and a scream leaked (out) from her mouth. From Baba Yaga's face, black fog-like miasma rose up. Ganelon was absorbing the demon's life.

"I failed to eat Torbalan because he died out on the sea, but I won't let you escape. Become my food."

"Don't, kid..."

The demon struggled. But while having a body twice as big as Ganelon's, Baba Yaga could not move her body as she wanted. Like a pitiful insect which fell prey to a natural enemy, the old demon woman was going to be eaten.

Even so, the old woman strenuously raised her right hand and tried to tear up Ganelon's body. Ganelon extended his free left hand and caught the demon's right hand. Though it was at a dreadful speed, but it was a natural movement which didn't let one feel it.

A dry sound resounded and the demon raised a short scream. Ganelon had crushed Baba Yaga's right arm.

That was the last reaction that Baba Yaga showed. From Ganelon's right hand, something like black sand rustlingly spilled over and fell.

It was Baba Yaga. The demon who could no longer maintain her body as her life was absorbed quietly crumbled and died out.

It was not only her face. The shoulders, arms, feet, wings; Baba Yaga's crumbling was also extending throughout her body. A demon that tormented humans so much. Who still survived even after receiving a powerful blow and should have probably been a threat for them in the future, was dipping its body into the deep water of death.

On the other hand, both eyes of the man who was small and looked weak were filled with overflowing malice.

The demon's right hand lost power and fell to the ground. At that moment, the demon's shoulder slipped down from its body like a withered branch separated from a tree. It became ash and was buried in the snow.

As a time of about 30 counts passed like that, the traces of the demon called Baba Yaga had already disappeared there. There were just black ashes buried in the snow.

Ganelon, who contentedly nodded, suddenly feeling someone's presence, turned his eyes to the trees soaring in a distant place.

Silently standing there was an old man who wrapped his body in a black robe.

Ganelon knew that that old man was called Drekavac. He was a demon like Baba Yaga and had served Duke Thenardier before.

Ganelon was surprised by the fact that Drekavac had showed up, but finding it suspicious that he was just standing there without saying anything, Ganelon frowned. If he had intended to save Baba Yaga, he might have shown anger or regret.

"Did you come to help your comrade? It looks like you were late though."

Ganelon calmly asked. Drekavac answered indifferently.

"I didn't come to help her. I didn't feel the need to do that, either."

Ganelon cocked his head in puzzlement. He thought that they were originally people of thin friendship, but they shouldn't be so composed.

"With this, you guys have lost three comrades. Koschei, Torbalan, and Baba Yaga. Including you, the remaining ones can already be counted with one hand."

At Ganelon's words, Drekavac revealed a sneer in the inside of his hood.

"You seem to be misunderstanding, it isn't necessary for all of us to remain in order to achieve our purpose. It's fine as long as one person remains at the appropriate time and place. —Koschei. Even if it's you."

Bloodlust filled Ganelon's eyes. The Ex-Duke put power into his right hand, slightly leaned forward and took a posture to kick the ground.

"To think that you see me as the same kind of you bastards, you grew quite senile."

While saying so, Ganelon however did not move immediately. Drekavac, looking like he was just standing, did not show any openings at all. He did not ride on Ganelon's provocation either.

"A mere human can't do something like sucking a demon. Even if you act like a human called Maximilian, you aren't human."

Drekavac turned his back. The voice of the old demon was in no way loud, but it properly reached Ganelon's ears.

"I don't mind even if the last one remaining is you. As long as the human world is overturned."

Drekavac walked away as such and disappeared into the trees. Only Ganelon was left on the snowy field. When he undid his stance and took a breather, Ganelon snorted in displeasure.

"The last one remaining... huh. Fine. It was my intention from the beginning after all."

Soliloquizing, Ganelon began to walk in the snowy field calmly. For the time being, his purpose of eating Baba Yaga was achieved. He would settle with it for now.

"I must return to Brune soon, but it's a little regrettable. Even spring is finally coming to this country of only snow. Well, I'm running out of hot strong drink, so I guess it's fine when thinking that I can drink the mellow wine of Brune. I'll come back again sometime soon..."

Ganelon slowly walked while leaving black shoe marks on the white ground.



The Lebus soldiers were burying their dead comrades near the run-down shrine when the battle was over. Although said burial, it doesn't mean that they dug holes and then covered them. In this case, they collected helmets and gauntlets and carved the owners' names.

Blended with the soldiers, Elizavetta, Tigre, Elen, Lim and Mashas also helped with the burial. Many gruesome corpses told them that the experience of just a while ago was reality. There were also a lot of soldiers who vomited at that sight.

The number of Lebus soldiers did not reach sixty horsemen. Since the number of casualties did not reach twenty, they calculated that about twenty horsemen ran away. It was no wonder if you think about the opponent.

"In a distant place of about ten Belsta, there should be another unit. Let's ask them for assistance at the same time as we search for those who escaped."

A senior soldier proposed that and Elizavetta accepted it. In addition, she also added not to charge them with the crime of running away. Originally, a flight in a battlefield was regarded as a crime. This was because it was a necessary measure in order to keep the morale and also not let the soldiers, who held their grounds and fought, hold dissatisfaction.

But, Elizavetta made this time an exception and the soldiers also showed agreement.

When the burial was finished, Elizavetta gave words of thanks to the soldiers with her back to the setting sun.

"You all fought well."

The red-haired Vanadis' figure was awful. Her red hair was disheveled and the hems of her dress were torn in several layers. Her white skin was badly-bruised and slightly dirty with earth and sand.

But, a bright smile floated on Elizavetta's face. The feeling of being proud of her soldiers was spread in her golden pupil, and the feeling of sympathy to them was spread in her blue pupil. That being also transmitted from her voice, the soldiers stuck out their chests to their master whom they looked up to, stretched up their back and saluted.

Elizavetta ordered half of the soldiers to rest, and the remaining soldier to search for those who ran away and the other units, and dismissed them for the time being.

It was after that that she faced Tigre.

Elizavetta and Tigre went to the shade of the run-down shrine to avoid the soldiers' eyes. Both of them looked straight at each other, their expressions were cloudy and filled with hesitation and impatience.

Elen, Lim and Mashas were watching that scene in a slightly distant place.

"What is he doing, that Tigre? Even though it'll just become troublesome if he doesn't quickly get it over with that talk of separation."

“Eleonora-sama.”

Lim called her lord’s name as to reprove her. Her blue eyes had dim uneasiness. Perhaps he had guessed Lim’s inner thoughts, Mashas lightly tapped her shoulders.

“Don’t worry. Tigre will come back.”

Lim unintentionally turned towards the old Earl with the gray beard. Mashas nodded and laughed.

“If he feels like it, he may continue his life as Urz even now. And forget all that he remembered.”

But, Mashas knew that Tigre would not choose that path.

Ahead of their looks, Tigre was in a maelstrom of confusion. He was about to open his mouth several times, but each time he closed it and rethought the words in his mind. It was also the same for Elizavetta.

However, Tigre finally made up my mind and said.

“—It was a short time, but I’m really grateful.”

Elizavetta opened her eyes wide and stared at Tigre. She then narrowed them dejected.

“Didn’t you have any better words to say?”

“It’s not that I didn’t have any, but...”

Troubled, Tigre rummaged his darkish red hair. Elizavetta said.

“Also talk to me like you talked to Eleonora. I’ll permit it.”

“Thank you.”

As he stopped using honorific language and expressed his thanks, Tigre then answered her words of a while ago.

“Thank you for your help. I considered many ways how to tell this, but I think that this seems like me the most.”

At his words, Elizavetta opened her eyes wide as she was surprised. Then, she lonely muttered.

“I see... Like you, huh.”

As Elizavetta dropped her gaze and then returned it to Tigre, she let some uneasiness spread in her Rainbow Eyes and asked.

“But, that’s right. When I met you for the first time, it was such a feeling. How much do you remember?”

She asked about the time when he was called Urz.

"Just about everything. About when I met you for the first time at that sandy beach. About when you asked me about your eyes. About when I slipped out with you and we went to the town."

Tigre answered so and continued.

"With that in mind, I decided to live as Tigrevurmud Vorn. I didn't forget about the time when I lived as Urz. But, I will no longer... live as Urz."

The time that it was Urz mixed in it, his speech got confused. However, Tigre did not mind it and Elizavetta did not blame him, too

"So, you'll return to Eleonora."

These words of Elizavetta seemed to be somewhat peevish rather than blaming him. After being at a loss for words for an instant, Tigre shook his head.

"Elen is important to me. But, it isn't that I'll return to her side."

Someday, he would return to Alsace in the Brune Kingdom. There were still two more years by the contract, but no one knows what will happen after an incident of this level.

As he thought about it to this extent, the silver-haired Vanadis' smile floated within Tigre's mind. Tigre rummaged his darkish red hair. Even though he only said it to Elizavetta just now, he was reluctant about leaving Elen's side.

Driving away his discord aside, Tigre stared at Elizavetta. He would talk with Elen after this. But before that, there was something that he had to say to Elizavetta.

"Elizavetta, I promise. If something happens to you, I'll rush over here immediately."

"Why?"

Elizavetta asked with a nasty voice.

"You, who aren't Urz, shouldn't have any relation with me."

"You've brought me support in Brune's civil war last year, right?"

It was when Tigre's decisive battle with Duke Thenardier was imminent. Elizavetta had cooperated with Tigre who was leading "the Silver Meteor Army"; although Elizavetta had also cooperated with the enemy Duke Thenardier.

"I can finally express to you my gratitude for that time. Thank you. It really helped us."

"It doesn't matter."

Elizavetta shrugged her shoulders and sighed. She seemed to really think so.

“Can you say that you’ll immediately rush over here with that reason alone?”

Tigre shook his head. He laughed and said.

“I said it a while ago, but I don’t intend to forget about the time when I was Urz. And, the me when I was Urz said it. That he wants to be helpful to you.”

Elizavetta fixedly stared at the youth this time. Then, she laughed.

“Are you seriously saying this?”

“I’m serious.”

“Then, if Eleonora and I were to fight, which side would you take?”

Elizavetta asked with a provocative gaze. That possibility still existed.

It wasn’t as if the ill feelings which were between Elen and Elizavetta had melted. Elen would not forgive Elizavetta and Elizavetta would also not forgive Elen.

After thinking a little, Tigre opened his mouth.

“I will act as mediator in the relation between you two.”

“You say it so easily, but do you really think that you can do such a thing?”

Elizavetta folded her arms and looked up at Tigre. Tigre tilted his head to the side.

“I don’t know. But, I consider both Elen and you as important people to me. Until I understand that it’s absolutely impossible, I’ll try.”

“I see...”

Elizavetta did not even try to deny his words.

“If you have any requests, please say them. If it’s something that I can do, then...”

Tigre swallowed his words there. This was because Elizavetta looked up at him with an unusually serious expression.

“You said that if it’s something that you can do, right?”

Tigre, overawed by her intensity (appeal), silently nodded.

Then, Elizavetta unfolded her folded arms and hugged Tigre.

To that unexpected action, Tigre was suddenly at a loss for words and he couldn't react, either. While burying her face in the youth's chest, Elizavetta said as she muttered.

"For a short while... it's fine for just a short while. Please, be Urz."

Tigre did not answer. He just quietly extended his hands to her back and gently hugged her.

How long did the two of them stay in that way? It was without a doubt shorter than thirty seconds.

Elizavetta released her embrace and quietly separated from Tigre. Tigre likewise separated from her.

"Thank you..."

Elizavetta took her eyes off Tigre and turned to Elen. At that time, Elen was standing bolt upright because of too much shock, but he came to her senses as she received the red-haired Vanadis' gaze.

When Elizavetta gave a small laugh, she took Tigre's hand and began to walk. Tigre turned a dubious face to her, but Elizavetta kept walking without saying anything.

Elizavetta stopped in front of Elen. She released Tigre's hand and folded her arms and proudly glared at Elen.

As for Elen, without so much as hiding her anger, she also glared at Elizavetta.



"I will return Lord Tigrevurmud whom I looked after."

Elizavetta said in a high-handed tone.

"Hou. So in Lebus, welcoming a guest with a horrible treatment means looking after him, huh. I've properly heard the circumstances. I heard that you did a lot of things such as making him stable boy and then personal attendant"

Elen took the opportunity to blame Elizavetta. But, Elizavetta calmly answered.

"Although I remember that such treatment was given to the man called Urz, I don't remember having roughly treated Lord Tigrevurmud."

Not only Elen, but also Tigre and Lim were dumbfounded at this answer. It was only Mashas who was in admiration.

"I see. It's certainly makes sense. As such, Vanadis-dono, where is that Urz?"

"He went for a trip."

Elizavetta stated in a steady tone these words which she had probably thought up beforehand. Her lines also had a "let's put it as such" suggestion.

Elizavetta did not deny Urz. Urz whom she had picked up had just secretly disappeared after the fight with the demon.

And at the same time, Elizavetta found Tigrevurmud Vorn said to be missing, and sheltered him. Eleonora Viltaria heard about this and took Tigre back with her adjutant Limalisha, and Mashas and Titta of Brune.

It was probably the only method where nobody would be hurt.

At that time, the long sword hung on Elen's waist and the black whip hung on Elizavetta's waist emitted light almost simultaneously. The two Vanadis surprised looked at their Viralt.

"That demon died...?"

As she read the will that her Viralt vaguely conveyed, Elizavetta stared wide-eyed; Elen as well. And Elizavetta's right arm suddenly hung down languidly.

"What's wrong?"

To Tigre who couldn't hide his strain and impatience, Elizavetta, although tilting her head to the side, tried to lift her right arm.

But, it couldn't stay lifted. Even though she had folded her arms until just now, it stayed just hung down languidly as if it lost strength.

"...Did something happen?"

Elen asked cautiously. Elizavetta not answering pinched her right arm with her left arm.

“I can’t still feel pain. And it doesn’t like it turns numb.”

Then, the red-haired Vanadis sighed.

The curse was without a doubt lifted. The demon had died after all.

However, she vaguely realized that it would probably require considerable time and efforts until she became able to use this right arm like before again.

“It’s the price for the power, I guess. It feels like I got off with just this much.”

Coming out of the run-down shrine’s shadow, Elen greatly stretched herself while bathing in the setting sun’s sunlight.

“Good grief. Should I say that the issue is finally settled?”

She took a small breath as if she was missing the hardships so far. Afterwards, they would return to Lebus’ castle town, welcome Titta, complete the etiquette in form and just return to LeitMeritz.

“Even if you say that it is settled, the mysteries increased though.”

Lim’s calm gaze was turned towards Tigre and the bow in his hand. The reason why the demon was so persistent to Tigre remained still a mystery. It was also unknown how many demons there were.

Unless they reached a conclusion in the matter about the demons, Tigre would not have peaceful days. The same thing could be said for LeitMeritz which was entrusted with the youth as a guest General. And also for Alsace which was the youth’s hometown, and the Brune Kingdom itself.

The silver-haired Vanadis lightly tapped the shoulder of her adjutant with a pensive expression.

“I understand your feelings, but it isn’t as if you will find an answer even if you worry about it now. Anyway, I’ll also ask Sofy. And also those guys depending on the situation.”

By those guys, she meant the other Vanadis — Ludmila, Elizavetta, Olga, and Valentina beside themselves (Elen and Sofy). Ludmila whose mother and grandmother were Vanadis might have learned something from her family.

There was also the possibility that Olga who had fought against Torbalan and returned to her territory Brest was investigating. Elizavetta would probably investigate in detail from now on. She had almost never talked with Valentina, but even if she knew nothing, it would be necessary to talk to her about it.

“I’m sorry I can’t be of help to you.”

Tigre apologized to Elen with a dejected expression. About the black bow, his heirloom, the youth knew nothing aside from what he experienced by himself. There should have been nothing which had records on the heirloom even in his mansion in Alsace.

“Don’t worry about it. We should just investigate from now on.”

The silver-haired Vanadis lightly blew off the regret and guilt which welled up in Tigre’s heart with a smile. While holding the feeling of being saved by her smile, the youth nodded.

“I’ll also investigate it when I return to Brune. Though, my return will probably be after quite some time.”

Mashas said while stroking his gray beard. After having rested his body in the castle town of Lebus, he planned to go to the Capital Silesia. He intended to have an audience with King Victor as a messenger of the Brune Kingdom and talk about Tigre.

“...Will you take Tigre back with you after all?”

Elen asked the old Earl with a lonely face. She understood that it could not be helped even if he did so, so she prepared herself for that; but as expected she could not repress her feelings. Still, Mashas could not also respond with a smile about this matter.

“I intend to do so, but it depends on King Victor. I don’t think that the negotiations will end immediately, so you will be still entrusted with Tigre as a guest General at least during spring.”

“I understand. While I’m in LeitMeritz, I shoulder all the responsibility regarding Tigre.”

It was when Elen answered so with a serious expression. Recognizing something which suddenly moved from far away, Tigre turned his gaze there.

From the other side of the wasteland, the silhouette of a horseman was running. He seemed to be a Lebus soldier. When that soldier recognized Elizavetta’s figure, he stopped his horse about 30 Alsins away from her. As he hurriedly went down to the ground, he stepped forward before Elizavetta with staggering steps.

“What’s the matter?”

Elen tilted her head to one side with a quizzical face. Lim answered her.

“Perhaps something happened in the castle town.”

At Lim’s words, Tigre unintentionally clenched his fist. Titta was in the castle town. She borrowed a room in the Imperial Palace, so she will be safe for the time being, but his heart could not calm down.

When that soldier went down on a knee before Elizavetta, he reported while being out of breath.

“S-Sorry! Earl Polus leading an army of 2000 soldiers had attacked! In respect to Vanadis-sama, we would like you to hurry and return to the Imperial Palace also for your safety...!”

When he shouted up to there, the soldier took out a letter from the bag hung on his waist. He gave it to Elizavetta with both hands.

“—Thank you for your hard work. Go take a rest.”

When the red-haired Vanadis received that letter with her left hand, she gave words of gratitude to the soldier. She called another soldier and ordered to give a meal and bed to the soldier and look after his horse.

After seeing that, Tigre walked towards Elizavetta. Elen, Lim and Mashas silently followed.

When the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl noticed him walking her way, she glanced at the letter in her left hand and returned her gaze to the youth. She held out the letter to Tigre.

“Can have you opened the contents and read it? —Lord Tigrevurmud.”

Perhaps because she was conscious of the unduly distant way of calling him, there was a little interval before she called Tigre’s name. When Tigre nodded and took the letter, he carefully broke the seal and opened the contents.

“It’s a letter to me from Naum.”

More precisely, it was a letter to Urz. Elizavetta revealed a wry smile.

“I expected it to be for you. After all, there is no way that Naum and Lazarl would know that I’m here.”

Since the soldier earlier found Elizavetta’s figure, he probably thought that he had to report to her above all.

Tigre ran his eyes over the letter, but he put on an expression showing that he didn’t know what to say. Elizavetta inclined her head to the side wonderingly. Elen and company who caught up with the youth put on dubious faces.

“What’s wrong, Tigre?”

“According to this letter, the one called Earl Polus... apparently intended to save me from Elizavetta.”

In Naum’s letter, it was written with a concise literary style that Earl Polus Orgelt Kazakov leading 2000 soldiers had invaded from the southeast, that he demanded to hand over Tigrevurmud Vorn, and that hence, he was in a stance which invited a battle.

『I don’t know where he checked it, but Earl Polus held the firm belief that you’re Earl Vorn. Our side recognize Urz’s existence as a personal attendant, but we denied everything about Earl Vorn,』

After Urz went out for Elizavetta’s search, the letter was closed (tightened) with the instructions of coming back at once to the Imperial Palace. The feelings of Naum who was concerned about the youth were transmitted from the sentences, and Tigre expressed his gratitude to the knight in his prime from the bottom of his heart.

Tigre looked around at the four people and explained the contents of the letter. When they finished listening, Elen and Mashas opened wide their eyes and put on amazed faces.

“What a bad timing, or perhaps should I say what an unlucky man, that Kazakov person!”

“You said it. If the letter had arrived yesterday or the day before yesterday, it would have been a different story, though.”

Unlike these two, Lim and Elizavetta were apparently brooding over something with a serious expression.

"Elizavetta-sama. Sorry to ask, but if there is something that you know about this Kazakov person, please could you tell us?"

Lim also had many thoughts regarding the red-haired Vanadis. However, she repressed all such feelings in the innermost depths of her head and gave priority to dealing with the situation at hand.

"If I have to briefly speak about his personality, he would be a conceited and ostentatious man, I guess."

Cold contempt was included in the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl's tone.

It was only about once or twice that Elizavetta had met Kazakov, but she knew well his temperament. This was because added to the fact that each other's territories were adjoined, in the case that something happened, there was a high probability that he would think to become enemy and investigate.

Of course, Elizavetta also knew that Kazakov disliked her using the Rainbow Eyes as the reason. And, there was also no reason for Elizavetta to hold good will towards Kazakov.

"He is a capable man be it as a lord, as a warrior or as a commander. He is also popular to the soldiers and the people his territory people, and there are also many nobles favorable towards him. On the other hand, he is a man with a very strong desire for honor. To the extent that I wouldn't even mind crossing a dangerous bridge to that end."

"Are you saying that his request to hand over Lord Tigrevurmud is also out of his desire for honor?"

"It's only a guess at this stage. There are too many too strange points."

Her eyes of different colors filled with doubt and suspicion, Elizavetta shook her head.

Kazakov insisted that Urz and Tigre was the very same person, but then that meant he must know about Urz and Tigre in detail.

But, Kazakov had never met Tigre, nor should he have so many interactions with Brune.

"Which means that there is someone who gave needless wisdom to Kazakov, huh."^[a]

Elen frowned in displeasure. Elizavetta nodded.

"Indeed. Kazakov also isn't stupid, so he probably heard the story from an outstanding person and would've been presented with much evidence."

As he folded the letter, Tigre asked in a careful tone.

"What will you do from here? Shall I meet this person and explain the circumstances?"

"That's too dangerous. We'd better quickly return to the castle town and announce that Lebus sheltered Tigre whose whereabouts had been unknown. If we do so, Kazakov will also withdraw."

At Elen's words, Lim and Mashas showed agreement as they nodded.

However, Elizavetta did not nod. She cast her gaze to the ground and was silently brooding over something. Suddenly, her face got filled with strain.

"There is a possibility that Kazakov is near here."

There was a faint unrest on Elizavetta's profile illuminated by the setting sun.

The neighboring geography and place's name emerged in her mind. When she considered their position and Kazakov's army's movements as she expected, that possibility was quite high.

"They advanced by entering from the southeast and deviating from the highway, right? And this area greatly deviates from the highway. If we meet, we might be forced to fight."

Tigre stared wide-eyed

"Is he that belligerent a man, that Kazakov?"

"He won't do something like thoughtlessly raising his soldiers, but once he raised them, he wouldn't withdraw that easily. Because he is confident in his judgment, he is a man who will think to coerce and gain advantages from negotiations even if he has to kick about an enemy."

The number of soldiers who were here now was approximately sixty. According to Naum's letter, Kazakov was leading 2000 soldiers. If they were found first and attacked, a defeat would be inevitable even if Elizavetta and Elen fought hard.

Elizavetta looked back to Tigre. For a moment, her pupils got cloudy and she seemed to want to say something, but she immediately returned to her expression as Vanadis.

"Lord Tigrevurmud. Return to the castle town with Eleonora and company."

"What will you do?"

As he received the red-haired Vanadis' gaze head on, Tigre asked in a calm tone. Although Elizavetta frowned as she expected the youth's reaction, she answered honestly.

"I will stay here with the soldiers. We don't know what Kazakov will do."

"In that case, let me help too."

"If a battle starts, you may die, you know? It will be extremely troublesome if you were to die in Lebus."

Elizavetta said in a sarcastic way, but it did not get through to the youth.

"I believe I said it earlier. That if something were to happen to you, I'll immediately rush over."

Tigre calmly stared at Elizavetta. His black pupils were straight and did not shake. The red-haired Vanadis turned her gaze and asked Elen and company for help.

“—It can’t be helped. Going with the flow, I’ll help too.”

Elen said so with a sigh. Elizavetta was dumbfounded; she blankly opened her mouth and looked at Mashas and Lim.

“I’d rather help than try to persuade these two.”

“If they are humans, no matter who they are, I think it’d better than the ones¹⁴ of a while ago.”

Lim answered with a resigned voice and Mashas nodded as to persuade himself. Although Tigre showed a face seeming to want to say “oops!” to this, he did not intend to change his decision.

To the confused Elizavetta, Elen said as the finishing blow.

“It will probably become a battle, right? You need people to fight even if it’s just one more, right? Then isn’t it simple? Consider it as a good bargain.”



It was about three days ago that the Polus army of 2000 which Orgelt Kazakov led had carry out the invasion of Lebus.

The Polus army was composed of 500 cavalrymen and 1500 infantrymen; all of them wore armor and helmets and wore fur clothes over their armor. The cavalrymen had spears and shields and the infantrymen carried swords, shields, and bows.

They did not openly advance through the highway, but passed through the wasteland and entered from the southeast of Lebus.

This was because they would stand out too much if they passed through the highway. Not to mention travelers and peddlers, they would immediately be noticed also by the Lebus soldiers protecting the fort along the highway. And then, Elizavetta would probably strengthen the highway with soldiers.

In the negotiations for getting back Tigrevurmud Vorn, it should become important on how far the Polus army could approach the castle town. The nearer the Polus army was to the castle town, the bigger the mental pressure, which Elizavetta would suffer from, would be.

Therefore, even if they were eventually noticed, they should get closer to the castle town even if it’s just by a little more. That was Kazakov’s aim.

And today, the soldier whom he dispatched as a messenger to the castle town of Lebus had returned. Kazakov invited that soldier into the barrack for the supreme commander. After it was only the two of them, the 35-year-old Earl Polus asked.

“What has Vanadis-dono said?”

“I am sorry. Vanadis-sama went out for an inspection, so I did not have an audience. I convey your Excellency’s words to a man called Lazarl, a civil official who serves Vanadis-sama...”

With his gaze, Kazakov urged him to go ahead. He also knew the name of Lazarl. He was a man who has worked in Lebus since the time of the previous Vanadis.

"Lazarl-dono certainly admitted to the existence of the man named Urz, but he persisted in saying that he knows nothing at all about Earl Vorn and asked whether it is not your misunderstanding. Moreover, he reproached us about having moved troops forward."

The soldier finished his report with a slightly perplexed feeling. When Kazakov nodded with a moody face, he told the soldier to take a break and dismissed him.

"It doesn't look like this distance is enough yet."

Now alone in his barrack, Kazakov revealed a sadistic smile. He investigated using someone and was convinced that Urz was Tigre.

"We will orderly advance to the castle town as such. That Vanadis with weird (eerie) eyes will eventually throw herself at my mercy. No, thinking about her honor, she may challenge me to a battle."

When his army resumed its march after finishing its rest, Kazakov gathered the commanding officers and told them so. Even though he had shouted "it's my war" and had advanced not to the highway, but to the wasteland where it was difficult to walk, the soldiers' morale was high.

As expected of the man with influence second only to Ilda in the northern part of Zhcted, Kazakov was by no means mediocre either as a lord or as a commander. He also had the confidence that the soldiers would follow him even in such a battle.

In that way, the Polus army of 2000 once again advanced through the wasteland of Lebus.

It was in the morning of the next day that a man asked for an audience with Kazakov, naming himself as a messenger of Elizavetta. Kazakov, also taking the opportunity to rest, stopped his army and met that man on horseback.

When he received the letter which the messenger respectfully held out, Kazakov broke the seal on the spot. He quickly looked through the letter inside.

"Vanadis-dono has very poor handwriting."

That was his first impression. That letter, which Elizavetta wrote as she tied a writing brush to her right hand which couldn't accumulate that much power, resented Kazakov's unreasonable invasion and requested him to withdraw at once.

『Our dukedom has certainly been entrusted with Tigrevurmud Vorn. I made my subordinates deny it because it was a necessary measure for our country. I do not know where your Excellency has learned about Earl Vorn from, but there is no reason for me to hand him over to your Excellency. We will send him safely to LeitMeritz, so please rest assured.』

As for Elizavetta, even if she was asked whether or not Tigre was there by the other party whom she disliked, there would be no reason to answer honestly. Besides, it was not like she did not hide the existence of an honor guest from others.

There were many times when Kazakov himself had such interactions as a feudal lord. But, this time he had forgotten about that. His loathsomeness of Elizavetta made him forget.

—Necessary measure, huh. Don't make me laugh.

When Kazakov carelessly folded the letter after she finished reading it, he threw it back to the messenger.

"I'm requesting for Earl Vorn to hand over. As long as that isn't done, all armies standing in my way will be crushed. Convey that to Vanadis-dono."

Kazakov did not believe Elizavetta's words about sending Tigre to LeitMeritz. In addition, Kazakov believed that by securing Tigre and sending him to the Capital by his own hands, he could respond to the trust of the King and Duke Bydgauche.

Waiting for the messenger to leave, Kazakov resumed his army's march.



By advancing about six Belsta to the southeast from the run-down shrine where Tigre and company had fought against Baba Yaga, there was a lake.

That lake which was called the Birche Lake had a distorted, elliptical shape and was half frozen. Because it was dangerous as there were frozen and unfrozen parts, fishermen who lived in the neighborhood had pulled up their ships during the winter.

Tigre and the others were at Birche's shore. There was Tigre, Elen, Lim, Mashas, Elizavetta and 170 Lebus cavalrymen. With the lake to their right and the forest which piled up snow at their back, they were laying a camp out.

Even though they would fight an enemy ten times superior in number, the Lebus soldiers' morale was high. More precisely, after they knew that the opponent was Earl Polus' army, their fighting spirit uplifted at a stretch.

"It looks like Kazakov is disliked very much."

Elen who observed the Lebus soldiers' state said so and laughed.

Tigre and Elen were behind the soldiers. The two people were spending a little time together before the battle begins.

The sun passed its zenith and inclined to the west.

By the reconnaissance unit's report, Kazakov's army seemed to have stopped in the nearby vicinity. The other party, also noticing Tigre and company's existence, let his soldiers rest and reformed their ranks before stepping onto the shore of Birche Lake.

While watching the soldiers who held their weapons and lined up, Elen said with nostalgia.

"Speaking of which, it's been a long time, eh."

"What?"

"Standing on the battlefield side by side like this; I guess it's been one year since then."

“—That’s right.”

It was approximately one year ago that Tigre was on a battlefield with Elen. It was in the Brune Kingdom’s civil war. When they fought against Ilda Krutis one month ago, he was not Tigre, but Urz; and the youth was with Elizavetta.

“This is the first time that I’ve fought in Zhcted.”

As Tigre realized that at this time, Elen shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

“I’m slightly displeased that the opponent is Kazakov. It also isn’t interesting to act separately from you, but... Well, I’ll leave it as that without asking too much.”

As Elen had said just now, the two of them would act separately from now on. Since this side’s numbers was overwhelmingly few, it could not be helped.

The sound of a horn echoed at Birche Lake’s shore. Kazakov army showed up. The silver-haired Vanadis lightly tapped Tigre’s shoulder.

“Then, later.”

“Don’t push yourself.”

At Tigre’s words, Elen responded by flappingly waving her hand.

Only these words were enough for now.

Parting from Tigre, Elen calmly advanced her horse. She found Elizavetta’s figure and rode her horse there. The red-haired Vanadis also noticing Elen looked into her direction.

“What’s the matter?”

“There is something I’ve forgot to ask. —Does Kazakov have a wife and kids?”

At Elen’s question (said) in a casual tone, Elizavetta also answered while looking puzzled.

“Yes. He should have a wife and two children. What about it?”

“Hand Kazakov over to me.”

Elen said in an unusually strong tone. The ruby-colored pupils and Rainbow Eyes collided in the air.

“Do you want me to hand the severed head of a fellow who has stepped in my territory with his dirty feet over to you?”

Although Elizavetta returned so in a defiant tone, she understood Elen’s real intention. LeitMeritz was far from Polus which Kazakov ruled. Even if Kazakov’s bereaved family were to think about revenge, it would be difficult to execute it.

“Why...?”

Elizavetta unintentionally asked. There should be no reason for Elen to do something like that for her. Rather, the fact that Elizavetta’s enemies increased should be convenient for Elen.

“You took care of Tigre after all. It’s to thank you for that.”

Elen answered while turning her back to Elizavetta. After a short pause, the silver-haired Vanadis added as troublesome. *(Added as troublesome? Need to fix doesn’t make sense maybe –added annoyingly, irritably, infuriatingly, maddeningly..s)*

“—If something happens to you, I’ll immediately rush over. He said such a thing, right? The fact that it was a pick-up line which he just realized aside, that guy will really do it if necessary. I don’t care that your enemies increase, but it’s unfortunate that he run about for that.”

Elizavetta didn’t know how much of her words were serious. Or was it just a makeshift thought and the first short lines might be her true intentions. The opposite could also be considered. As she hesitated about how she should answer back and remained silent, Elen piled up more words.

“In the first place, do you intend to step forward in a state where you can’t even use your right arm? Just stay still in the rear.”

And Elen’s figure slipped into the soldiers and disappeared in a moment.

Elizavetta was fixedly staring at the area where she disappeared.



When he knew that the number of the enemies they would confront was only a little less than 200, Kazakov gave a sigh mixed with amazement. And hearing that the Vanadis Elizavetta Fomina was among them, he was further amazed.

“Did that girl finally lose it?”

He muttered so seriously. But, Kazakov braced himself as he recovered from surprise. The opponent was a Vanadis who could be a match for a thousand (men). He should err on the side of caution.

Kazakov divided his 2000 soldiers into three units. The first unit was composed of 100 cavalry and 400 infantry and the second unit was composed of only 400 cavalry. And the 1100 soldiers gathered in the third unit were only infantry. This third unit had the duty of protecting the rear of the first unit and was also valuable reserve military power.

Making the second unit the main force, Kazakov stood at its vanguard. He wore armor and grasped a mace in his hand.

With Birche Lake’s shore to their left, the second unit and the third unit lined up. The third unit stood at their rears. It was a battle formation with the thickness lengthwise. There was no way they would lose if they clashed head on.

“How is the enemy’s state?”

Kazakov called his adjutant and asked.

"The Lebus soldiers didn't change and they become firm with the forest at their back. Even if there are signs of their number decreasing, there is no sign of it increasing. I would say around 100."

Kazakov thought about whether there were soldiers who fled. If the enemy's number was large, he would consider that there was a possibility of a detached force; but he thought that it wouldn't be that big a deal even if about 60 or 70 soldiers started something.

"It became dark."

The adjutant looked up at the sky and listlessly muttered. The day had fairly gone down. In another half a koku, the sun would turn gold and the sky would be dyed vermillion. In other words, the enemies who ran away under cover of the darkness of dusk might appear.

"Let's crush them before the sun sets."

Kazakov understood that here was enemy territory and that it would become disadvantageous to them when it became dark.

While looking at the Birche's lakeshore that was on the left, the Polus army started their advance. Since the Lebus army wasn't going to move from the state where they had the forest at their back, the Polus army had to shorten the distance to them.

In the place where the distance between both armies shortened to about 2 Belsta, Kazakov gave instructions to the second unit.

The second unit began to move in an unexpected way with the enemy close at hand. As expected of a unit composed of only cavalry, their movements were fast. The roar of horses' hooves which resounded as they were transmitted through the earth seemed reliable for Kazakov.

Kazakov made the second unit head to the forest which was spread at the back of the Lebus army

It was his idea to do a pincer attack from the front and rear by having the first unit challenge the enemy to a decisive battle head on, and coupled with that, the second unit which went through the forest, will attack the enemy from the rear. Even if the Lebus army had thought about any moves which would be bad for them (Polus army), there was still the third unit on standby.

Kazakov revealed a triumphant smile and grasped his mace.

The forest which the Lebus army had at their back was broad and of the size of about 100 Alsins square. The Kazakov troops' second unit which rode their horses and arrived near that forest immediately got down from their horses. Riding horses wasn't suitable within the forest where trees grew thick.

The second unit's commanding officer first made 50 soldiers advance into the forest. The soldiers setting up their spears and shields stepped in.

What they were cautious about when they advanced into the forest were traps set underfoot. If there was something as simple as just setting rope between trees, there were also cases when steel traps were hidden for pitfalls and hunting. Snow especially piled up in this forest and such traps were hard to notice.

"I don't mind even if it takes some time. Advance carefully."

The commanding officer encouraged the soldiers as he said so. With only the military power of the first unit, which was originally the main unit, they could overwhelm the Lebus army. They did not need to get impatient.

In that way, it was when they advanced about 30 Alsins. The soldiers who were in the forest heard the sound of wind howling. When they turned their gazes to each other wonderingly, one soldier emitted a short scream and fell to the ground. One arrow ran into his head. It was an instant death.

Strain ran among the soldiers. It was shot from somewhere. They held up their shields, lowered their bodies and ran their eyes around their surroundings. But, no Lebus soldiers' figures could be seen at all.

They once again heard the sound of the wind. Another soldier's head was pierced by an arrow. He never got up again.

Impatience and unrest were born among the soldiers and they stopped moving with their shields still held up as such. They gathered little by little, huddled together with each other and concentrated their gazes at their surroundings.

In the place where about five soldiers had gathered, the third arrow was shot. It went past the side of a shield as if it was carefully aiming at it and ran into the face of a certain soldier. As they watched that man who lost power in his whole body lean on a comrade, the soldiers screamed.

They should be able to guess from which direction the arrows came flying from the angle of the arrow which ran into their comrade. But, no matter how much they strained their eyes, they weren't able to catch the enemy's figure. Either their enemies concealed themselves very skillfully or they shot the arrows from a fairly distant place.

The soldiers, unable to endure it, came out of the forest and reported the circumstances to the commanding officer. Though they had not yet advanced through half the forest, they had already lost three of their comrades. Still, if the enemy's figure could be found, they wouldn't have minded advancing; but it couldn't be found at all. A superstition-like fear made them retreat.

The captain who heard the soldiers' report was amazed as expected, and got angry and harshly scolded them.

"Are you telling me that having 50 people, you weren't even able to find one enemy archer? If someone shoots an arrow in such a forest, it'll be within 30 Alsins no matter how far away it's from. Besides, arrows were shot without pausing, there should be more than one archer hidden."

Even if it was someone who could fire an arrow from more than 200 Alsins away, it was often said that he couldn't fire it from more than 30 Alsins in the forest. This was because it would definitely hit a tree on the way. Even if he found a little gap so that it did not hit a tree, he would need the skill to shoot the arrow in that gap this time.

The captain first had those soldiers step back, glared at the forest and groaned. Impatience arose in his heart. Even though they must quickly break through such a forest and appear from behind the enemy.

After thinking, the captain prepared 150 soldiers. He should just completely cover the inside of the forest with soldiers and make them advance. Even if there were casualties, he sent them in by ordering them to just advance as such.

As expected, arrows came flying, but the Polus soldiers ignored their hit comrades and silently advanced within the forest. Then at last, one soldier went through the forest. The sound of weapons, angry voices and screams peculiar to a battlefield could be heard from far away.

But, that soldier couldn't even witness the scene of the battlefield. The moment he came out of the forest, his head was smashed along with his helmet by a black whip which tore the atmosphere and attacked him.

Standing immediately near the forest was the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl Elizavetta Fomina. She still hung her right arm from her shoulder with a cloth, but she grasped the black whip with her left hand and was proudly scowling deep into the forest.

The Polus soldiers who were going to pass through the forest at any time now were shocked when they saw her. The enemy's supreme commander was right before their eyes; without having even one soldier as a guard.

Raising a battle cry, the Polus soldiers headed towards Elizavetta. But, their actions were very chaotic. The topography inside the forest did not allow for well-organized actions.

And even if Elizavetta was wielding her Viralt with her left hand, she could deal with two or three soldiers all at once.

Each time the black whip tinged with lightning tore the atmosphere, a Polus soldier's body was smashed and blown off somewhere, and fresh blood scattered on the snow.

Because of only one Vanadis, they could no longer come out of the forest. If they avoided Elizavetta and made a great detour in the forest, they would further stray from their comrades. Moreover, arrows occasionally came flying and certainly took their lives.

The Polus soldiers stopped their movements and gradually began to retreat.

—I knew from seeing it many times, but he's quite something.

Elizavetta looked up at the trees and inwardly muttered. Tigre should be somewhere in this forest. He camouflaged his figure by putting on an overcoat with bark stuck on it, and lay hidden with only a bow and arrows.

The reason why the Lebus army had the forest at their back was to use the forest and forcibly separate the soldiers in the Polus army. They believed that if it was Tigre, he could hold them back and gain the necessary time. And, Elizavetta would crush and disperse the enemy who came out of the forest.

Elizavetta took her eyes off from the forest and turned to look back. Ahead of the Vanadis of Rainbow Eyes' gaze, the Polus army's first unit and about one hundred Lebus cavalrymen led by Elen were clashing.

Kazakov stood at the vanguard of the Polus soldiers and wielded his mace. He had already defeated nearly ten Lebus soldiers and the mace in his hand was dyed red with fresh blood as if showing Kazakov's nickname.

—Why?

Within the whirlpool of roars and screams, Kazakov could hide his unexpected thought. While having a military power more than ten times the enemy's, it was unbelievable why they could not overwhelm the enemy. As he even thought about whether he was so incompetent, he then persuaded himself "that can't be it".

—Should I throw in the third unit to overcome them at once?

When he thought about such a thing, one soldier showed up to report.

"The third unit in the rear received an enemy's surprise attack!"

Kazakov opened his eyes wide. The third unit was in a place where it was hard to receive a surprise attack. After all, the first unit led by Kazakov was in front of them and there was Birche Lake on their left.

—Did they put down soldiers for an ambush somewhere? Otherwise, the enemy's movement will be too fast for sneaking around. The third unit received the enemy's attack from the rear. Having set the surprise attack were about 30 Lebus soldiers led by Lim and Mashas.

They broke the ice of the frozen lake, crossed it and had sneaked around from behind the Polus troops. Hence, they were able to attack with a speed beyond Kazakov's expectation.

It was a raid of only 30 soldiers, so they did not deal great damage. The Lebus' detached force had immediately escaped on rafts, too. But, the psychological influence that their existence gave to Kazakov and the Polus soldiers was great. Who knows when they would attack again from the lake and the rear?

It became difficult for Kazakov to use the third unit as reserve forces. Given the situation, he found it suspicious that the enemy's total number was less than 200. Originally, the fact itself of standing before 2000 enemies with 200 soldiers was improbable. Kazakov began to wonder about the possibility of a hidden military power.

"Now that it's come to this, I'll kill the Vanadis and end all of this."

As he decided so, Kazakov resolutely charged into the midst of the enemy. He fiercely flung his mace against the Lebus soldiers that entered his range. He smashed their heads along with their helmets and broke their arms and the swords that tried to block it. Spurts of blood reflected in the setting sun and on Earl Polus' sublime figure which was on horseback.

The mace which he wielded aiming at a new enemy was repelled by a flash of a long sword swung from the side. Kazakov ran his gaze and frowned in surprise as he saw the long sword's user.

It was a young girl with silver hair and ruby-colored pupils.

"To think that there is a girl on a battlefield. Who are you?"

“I am Eleonora Viltaria, the Vanadis of LeitMeritz.”

“Oh. So you’re the “Wind Princess of the Silver Flash” I’ve heard rumors about. Why are you here?”

As long as the Rainbow Eyes were not involved, Kazakov was a man who could attend to his opponent with due respect even if that opponent was a Vanadis. Elen sensed that and returned words as a warrior.

“Unfortunately, it isn’t something to speak of on a battlefield. Earl Polus, gather your soldiers and make them withdraw. If you insist on advancing, then I, the Wind Princess of the Silver Flash, shall be your opponent.”

“Then, you shall be my opponent!”

At the same time with those words, the mace attacked with a terrifying speed. Elen’s body was carried away by the wind pressure just by having grazed it, and the second blow would probably be struck there (where her body was carried).

Elen, trying to not clash with it head on, inflicted a wound while shifting the mace’s trajectory using her long sword and looked for a chance. Despite Elen’s sword skills, it would be an impossible feat if not for the Silver Flash, her Viralt.

The mace tore the atmosphere and the long sword let wind howl. The sound of blades resounded, sparks scattered and both parties’ weapons clashed over and over again.

Suddenly, a metallic sound of destruction echoed drowning out the surrounding voices and sounds. The tip of Kazakov’s mace was blown off from the middle. Kazakov groaned, even so he still swung his mace where only the handle remained. Elen calmly mowed down her long sword.

The man’s head flew leaving trails of blood. The Polus soldiers who were around Kazakov opened their mouths befuddled and stopped their movements. As Earl Polus’ head fell on the ground, it bounced once then rolled.

Elen approached her horse as if protecting that head and said to the Polus soldiers.

“Bring it back. And tell the bereaved family that the one who killed Orgelt Kazakov is Eleonora Viltaria.”

When Kazakov’s death was announced, the Polus soldiers lost their fighting spirit all at once and retreated. They were originally told “this is my battle” by Kazakov when they asked about this expedition. The soldiers carried arms and followed for their lord’s sake.

Now that that lord has died, they no longer had any reason to fight. There were those among them who advocated for revenge, but there was no one who could unify them.

After the Polus army retrieved as many of their comrade’s corpses as they could, they withdrew.

After this, it rapidly resulted in the Earl Polus House (who lost Orgelt Kazakov) losing the support of the neighboring lords. It might have been inevitable since they lost Kazakov who was not only blamed by the King for having said “my battle”, but was also a man that had ability.

Finally, there was someone who came in contact with the noble feudal lords, who distanced themselves from the Earl Polus House, got their favor and support and quickly expanded his/her influence in the northern part of Zhcted.

That person's name was Valentina Glinka Estes.

EPILOGUE

Four days after the battle at Birche Lake, Tigre and company had returned to the castle town with Elizavetta. Elizavetta who once again explained the situation to Naum and the others formally announced that they were entrusted with Tigre.

And, the youth gently hugged the chestnut-haired girl who was bewildered after she saw Tigre. The girl wept in a loud voice in the youth's chest.

In addition, on the night of that day, one Muozinel person calmly left the castle town.

"Tigrevurmud Vorn, huh... So, you're no longer Urz."

That Muozinel person muttered with a sigh. Though it was a short time, it was also a fun trip for him. If that youth had remained Urz as such, he would have surely invited him to his native land.

Why don't you leave such a cold country and come with me? With your bow skill, you'll immediately obtain even the great title of "Star Shooter" that every archer wishes for...

However, when he left the castle town and had walked for a quarter of a koku, he threw away such sentiment. What he should do was to hurry up and return to his native land, and reported it to his master. That Tigrevurmud Vorn was alive and that his bow skill was more than what the rumors said.

Standing on a semicircular balcony, Tigre was watching the stars.

It was an inn located in Lebus' castle town.

Elizavetta had told him to stay at the Imperial Palace, but Tigre politely declined.

There were many memories of his life as Urz in that Imperial Palace. And above all, it would confuse many people. When he said that, Elizavetta could not help but laugh.

What was prepared instead was this inn. It was a quite high quality inn even in the castle town and a bathhouse using steam was also installed. Elen, Lim, Mashas and Titta also stayed at this inn by Elizavetta's arrangement, and they seemed to be satisfied.

The dinner was also luxurious.

"Actually, I want to make a racket all night to celebrate your return."

Mashas said so and revealed a wry smile. But as expected, everyone was tired to do that. Soon after the fight against the demon was over, they had to repel Kazakov's army. There were also many wounds that were not cured yet.

"Well, whatever. When spring comes, come to Brune. Her Highness the Princess would also be eager to know about your safety after all."

"That's right. But, may I really return to Brune?"

Now, Tigre was to stay in Zhcted as a guest General for three years. That was based on a respectable contract. But, Mashas shook his head to him so as to say "don't worry about it".

"About this time, there is indeed a problem. I'll go to the royal capital Silesia after this; there are a lot of things I have to talk about with His Majesty the Zhcted King. If I go back after having only confirmed your safety, it wouldn't be any different from being a fool's errand."

What Mashas said was quite right, so Elen and Lim said nothing. A decisive crack nearly arose between Brune and Zhcted. For Mashas, he would probably not be satisfied unless he raised at least one complaint.

After they finished the dinner, Naum and Lazarl visited the inn. They had probably heard about the circumstances from Elizavetta. When they saw Tigre, they respectively smile wryly as they were troubled.

"Please speak as usual."

When Tigre said so to exercise tact, the two men respectively gave words of goodbye and exchanged handshakes with Tigre. Any more than that was unnecessary for both sides.

After having seen off the two men, Tigre did not return to his room and instead came to this balcony on the second floor of the inn.

Night wore on and the castle town was reflected only as series of black shadows.

There was no light other than the shine of the moon and stars. Tonight was also without clouds and that was enough for the youth.

"—It sure was a long trip."

As he muttered deeply emotional, he reminisced about the events of these several months. He had proceeded to the Asvarre Kingdom as a messenger, met Sasha, and met Olga and Matvey in the port town.

—Speaking of which, Sasha passed away...

When he heard about her death from Elen, Tigre was at a loss for words for a moment. He regretted that he did not talk to her about more things; he recited the name of the Goddess Elis of winds and storms and prayed for the peace of her soul.

He had met various people in Asvarre. Prince Jermaine who tried to hold them prisoner. Prince Elliot whom they fought against. Tallard Graham who got Princess Guinevere as ally and ended up victorious in the civil war. His subordinates starting with Ludra. The mercenary Simon.

And the white demon Torbalan. Though he heard that Sasha had defeated him, it was a terrifying existence.

—I must know more about that black bow.

When thinking about the words of Torbalan and Baba Yaga, they seem to still have comrades. He did not know their purpose, but there was no doubt that he and his heirloom, the black bow, were involved. It was also necessary to have the Vanadis including Elen give him advice.

Even in the dozens of days after he became Urz, many things had happened. He became a stable boy, a personal attendant and was then exceptionally promoted to adviser.

When he left LeitMeritz, it was the end of summer. He should have been able to return in autumn.

However, let alone autumn, winter was going to end soon. These were hectic days to the extent that he felt nostalgia from the numerous fierce battles in the Asvarre Kingdom.

He thought that it was good that he got to know Elizavetta, Naum and Lazarl.

“Urz, huh...”

He wondered about what would've happened if he had lived as Urz.

The youth vaguely thought about the path which he had closed by himself.

Elizavetta was a master whom he looked up to. Naum and Lazarl were also reliable superiors. There were many people whom he got along with to the extent of exchanging greetings. He might've eventually made close friends, find a lover and build a family.

Tigre shook his head. The him who walked a life completely different from the current him.

That was a fun imagination (thought).

And it was not something beyond imagination.

“—What’s wrong?”

He heard a voice from behind. At the same time, a soft breeze caressed the scruff of his neck.

A silver-haired girl stood there.

“If you stay there dressed like that, you’ll catch a cold.”

“I wanted to enjoy the cool evening a little. What about you, Elen? Are you all right?”

Worrying half seriously, Tigre asked. She had also gone through fierce battles just like Tigre. He wondered whether she should be sleeping or not. He was thinking that, but Elen shook her head. She stood next to Tigre.

The two people silently looked at the sky for a while. There were many things that they wanted to talk about with each other. To the point that only one night would by no means be enough.

But, both of them could not readily start talking. The first words didn't come out well.

How much time did they pass just looking at the starry sky like this?

Elen asked as she suddenly remembered.

"That reminds me, what about the silver coin I gave you?"

One silver coin where "good luck" was written. When he had left LeitMeritz at the end of summer, Elen had given it to Tigre. The youth shook his head with a bitter smile.

"It probably sank in the sea."

After a short pause, he added.

"It might have possibly sunk in my stead."

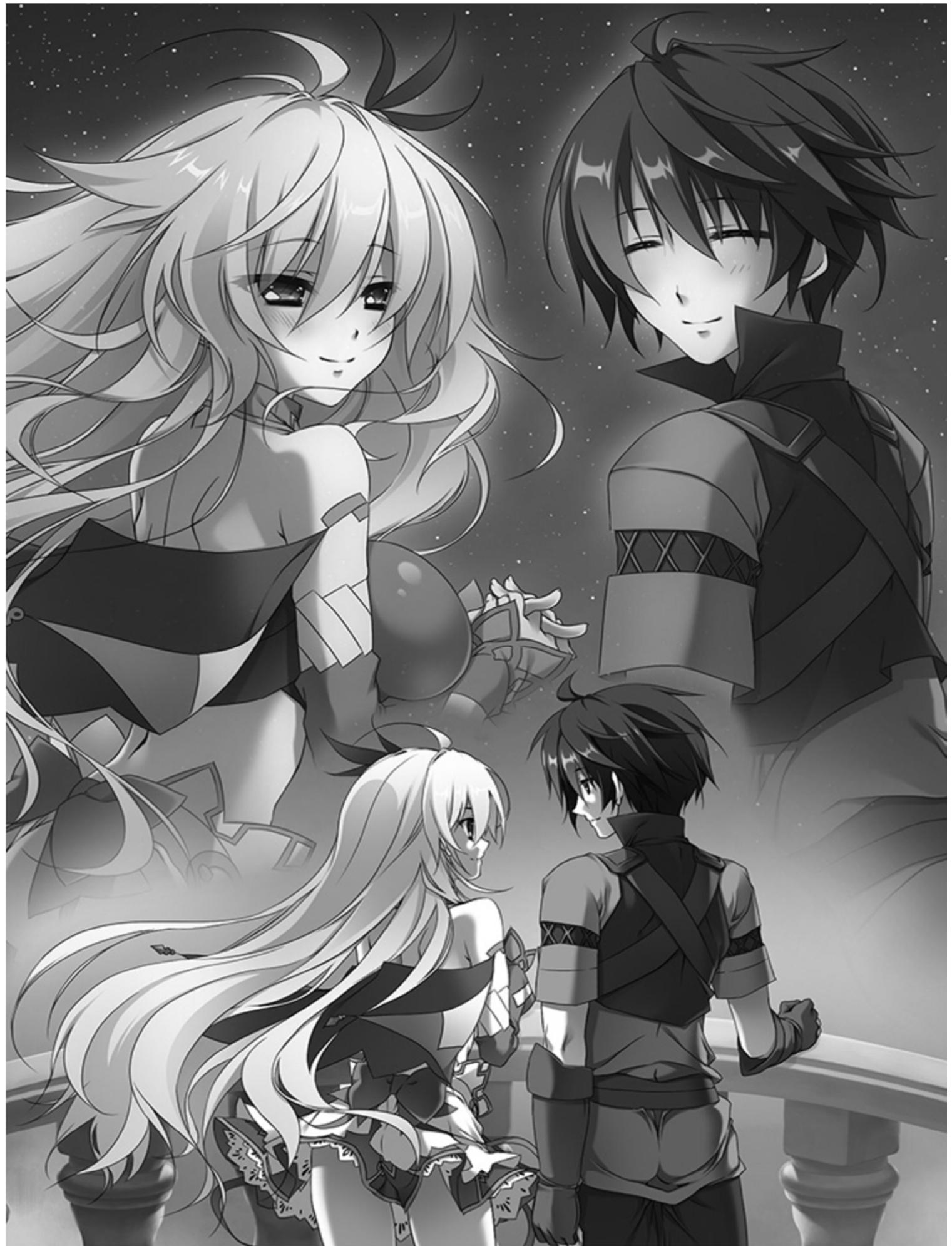
At Tigre's words, Elen looked at the youth with a wondering face. She then smiled.

"I guess it's fine if you think so. After all, you came back safely like this."

They moved their gazes, which were looking at the starry sky, at each other's faces.

The two people finally began to talk gradually; about things so far and about things to come.

That was a happy time.



References

Chapter 1

[1] as to say that he agrees with Damad on the fact that he couldn't return by himself

[2] he meant him

[3] sing. solatium; a thing given to someone as a compensation or consolation

[4] he speaks about Eugene Pardu here

Chapter 2

[1] where she asked him what he thinks of her eyes

[2] I think the talk here is the one about the trip. Not sure.

[3] Urz is referring to how he couldn't connect Mashas's name with the old man's figure in his memory

Chapter 3

[1] as in doing the odd jobs in the group

[2] meaning very fast/near like how ex. it's just around the corner

Chapter 4

[1] means it didn't hold it back even for a second

[2] I think it's Ganelon's demon's name. For the details about Koschei, read [here](#);

[3] Kazakov に、いらぬ知恵をつけた者がいるというわけか (bad TL, please fix it)

[4] here, Mashas speaks about the dolls of clod created by Baba Yaga